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## Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	12/28 Weather events prove climate change here
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/year-climate-extreme-weather-events-prove-climate-change/story?id=81771045">https://abcnews.go.com/US/year-climate-extreme-weather-events-prove-climate-change/story?id=81771045</a>
GIST	<p>This may have been the year the world finally began to pay attention to the mayday calls for <a href="#">climate change</a> and the harmful effects warming global temperatures will have -- not just on the environment, but on human life.</p> <p>Scientists have long warned of the calamity that could result from rising global temperatures. Predictions such as extreme temperature events, the increase of severe drought and more intense storms have all come to fruition in 2021 -- around the world and close to home.</p>

People will soon feel the impacts in their own backyards, President Joe Biden said on Nov. 2, his last day at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland. There, world leaders emphasized that climate change is already happening and costing billions of dollars -- about \$100 billion in the U.S. alone.

The damage done to the Northern hemisphere this year alone has been "devastating," Jason Smerdon, a climate scientist for Columbia University's Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory, told ABC News.

"So this is just one more piece of bad news and lots of events that are impacted by global warming," Smerdon said.

Here are some of the biggest weather events to occur in 2021:

### **Deadly flooding**

Devastating flash flooding events killed thousands of people all over the world in 2021. The majority of the events were a result of record rainfall.

A state of emergency was declared in Washington state last month after damaging floods resulting from [multiple occurrences of "atmospheric rivers,"](#) huge plumes of precipitation extending from the Pacific Ocean and into the Northwest. The damage to homes, public infrastructure and area business centers was estimated to cost at least \$50 million, local newspaper the Bellingham Herald reported.

A ferocious storm in the Detroit area on July 24 [flooded Interstate 94](#) and knocked out power to hundreds of thousands of people. Trees, houses and businesses sustained major damage in the storm.

Also in July, hundreds of people were either dead or unaccounted for in countries in Western Europe after [days of record rainfall](#) caused river banks to burst, triggering dangerous flooding in Germany, Belgium and southern parts of the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Dozens of people were also killed, and hundreds of thousands more displaced, after [nearly a year's worth of rain](#) came down in just three days in Henan province in July. Its capital, Zhengzhou, is located on the banks of the Yellow River. And the cleanup wasn't the sole focus amid the aftermath. Food security and supply in the country was disrupted after major roadways were transformed into riverbanks.

[One-in-100-year floods](#) are now happening so often, the term may soon need to change, Robert Mason, extreme hydrologic events coordinator and Delaware River master for the U.S. Geological Survey, told ABC News. While the term is based on existing data, it is possible for major floods happen in back-to-back years, so the USGS is looking at different ways of quantifying back-to-back major flooding events Mason said.

### **Raging wildfires**

In August, wildfires burning through the [drought-ridden Siberian forest](#) were so widespread, the event was larger than all the fires raging this summer around the world combined.

At the same time, a major wildfire ravaged a pine forest and burned homes nears Athens, Greece, on the heels of the [country's worst heat wave](#) that left forests full of dry fuel to further spread the blaze.

Dangerous fire conditions also continued in the Western U.S. At several points over the summer, at least 50 fires were burning uncontained.

Fires in California continued to break records. The Dixie Fire, the [largest non-complex fire in California state history](#) that scorched through nearly 1 million acres, decimated the town of Greenville -- destroying more than 100 homes and leaving next to nothing untouched by flames in the downtown neighborhood.

### **Intense drought**

Not only does drought have the ability to exacerbate wildfire conditions, but it also has the potential to debilitate communities.

For decades, scientists have been predicting an intensifying drought, especially in the Western U.S. A [megadrought](#), a term used to describe a severe and intense drought that spans a couple of decades, is currently plaguing much of the region, [depleting reservoirs to the lowest levels in history](#) and threatening the agricultural industry.

Water levels in [Lake Mead](#) and Lake Powell, the two largest reservoirs in the country, hit alarming lows, and the [first-ever water shortage](#) was declared for Lake Mead. This year was California's driest in a century, and the West [could face a severe water crisis](#) if the trends continue.

The [megadrought is directly linked to climate change](#), and there will not be much improvement in the next century, even if precipitation were to suddenly increase, scientists say. About half of the severity of the ongoing megadrought has been attributed to warming temperatures alone, Daniel Swan, a climate scientist at UCLA, told ABC News.

"Without that warming, the drought would arguably not be a megadrought at all," he said.

### **Extreme temperatures**

Warming global temperatures don't always translate into warming events. Sometimes, the pendulum swings to the other extreme -- freezing temperatures.

The polar vortex that slammed Texas and other nearby states with unprecedented winter weather in February is the costliest winter event to ever occur in the U.S.

More than 10 million customers in the state were without power for more than a week following [back-to-back winter storms](#) that brought snow and arctic temperatures, [causing at least \\$20 billion in damage](#) and killing more than 170 people.

Also in February, Arctic air plagued the Chicago area with temperatures that felt like negative 30 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit. The cold snap [nearly broke records](#), with more than a two-week stretch of temperatures of 25 degrees or below.

The Pacific Northwest, known for its chilly, wet temperatures, experienced the opposite problem over the summer with multiple deadly heat waves.

A historic heat wave in the region sent temperatures soaring past 100 degrees in major cities like Seattle and Portland in June. Temperatures hit 116 degrees in some places for days on end. Another heat wave blanketed the region one month later as dozens of wildfires burned uncontained nearby.

The majority of the residents in the area, acclimated to the typical damp climate, were not equipped with air conditioning, causing concern for the health of vulnerable populations.

"When there's not relief at night, and people don't have access to air conditioning, then we're gonna see a lot more heat-related illnesses and stress," Larry O'Neill, Oregon's state climatologist, told ABC News.

The heat wave also exacerbated the megadrought, leaving even less water to maintain local biodiversity and for agriculture, said O'Neill, adding that a lot of the vegetation in the area is "drought-stressed."

These events are likely the result of a weakening polar vortex, climate scientist Jessica Moerman, vice president of science and policy at the Evangelical Environmental Network, a faith-based environmental group, told ABC News.

### **Powerful storms**

This year did not [break records in the same way 2020 did](#), but it only took one storm to cause a record amount of damage after it tracked through the U.S.

The behavior of [Hurricane Ida is a prime example of climate change](#), according to scientists. The dangerous storm barreled through the Caribbean before taking aim at the Gulf Coast of the U.S. In the 24 hours before making landfall in Louisiana on Aug. 29, it strengthened by a whopping 55 mph, making it a Category 4 storm with maximum sustained winds of up to 150 mph.

Hurricanes have tended to intensify more rapidly over the last three years, likely due to the warmer water available, Philip Klotzbach, a research scientist at Colorado State University's Department of Atmospheric Science, told ABC News before the 2021 hurricane season began.

Ida then remained a major hurricane over Louisiana for nine hours after making landfall, something meteorologists say has never happened before.

But the damage did not stop as the remnants of Ida left the South. As the system collided with a cold front, it dumped torrential rain and spawned tornadoes and devastating flash flooding [across the Northeast](#) days after it left Louisiana. As much as 5 inches of rain per hour were reported in highly urbanized areas in New York and New Jersey. Roadways in parts of New York City transformed into rivers, killing dozens of people living in basement apartments.

Nearly 100 people in the U.S. were killed [as a result of the monster storm](#).

While the overall number of hurricanes is not likely to increase as a consequence of global warming, scientists believe that, over time, the storms that generate will get stronger and more intense.

As climate change intensifies, what is considered to be a "500-year storm" will change as well, Oscar Schofield, a professor of biological oceanography at Rutgers University, told ABC News. A 500-year storm is one that, before sea levels began to rise, would only occur once every 500 years, but since ocean levels are so much higher will occur closer to once in every 100 years, Schofield said

"A 500-year storm, in terms of flooding impacts, is going to become like a 100-year storm, because the ocean is so much higher," Schofield said. "It doesn't take as much to put push the ocean onto the shore."

### **The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world**

The bad news for sea level rise is the region that adds the most water to worldwide ocean levels as ice melts is also warming twice as fast as the rest of the world.

The substantial decline in Arctic sea ice extent since 1979 is one of the [most iconic indicators of climate change](#), according to the Arctic Report Card released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration earlier this month.

The period between October and December 2020 was the warmest Arctic autumn on record, dating back to 1900, according to the report.

In addition, the average surface air temperature over the Arctic from October 2020 through September 2021 was the seventh-warmest on record. This is the eighth consecutive year since 2014 that air temperatures were at least 1 degree Celsius above the long-term average, according to the report.

The warming is occurring so swiftly that the Arctic Ocean is now acidifying faster than the global ocean and beavers are colonizing what was previously the Arctic tundra of western Alaska, which has experienced widespread greening, according to the report.

The Greenland Ice Sheet, the largest contributor to sea level rise in the world, experienced three melt episodes in late July and August, the report states.

Sea level rise will be one of the most disastrous consequences of global warming, as it erodes coastlines and eventually causes residents who live near the ocean inland, experts say.

Even if the rise seems minuscule -- about 8 inches since the Industrial Revolution, according to the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) -- infrastructures located near the ocean were not built to withstand those levels, Schofield said.

### **Greenhouse gases will need to be significantly reduced**

A multi-layered approach -- from policy to industry to the finance sector -- is needed to curb the necessary amount of greenhouse gases.

President Joe Biden made addressing climate change a major focus of his 2020 presidential campaign, re-joining the [Paris Agreement](#) on Inauguration Day. Climate change has also taken front stage in Biden's \$1.7 trillion infrastructure package, \$555 billion of which has been dedicated for climate and clean energy investments.

The world will need to re-think how it obtains its energy -- moving away from coal and natural gas and toward solar energy, wind farms, [green hydrogen](#) and electricity.

The U.S. auto industry is already making efforts to ramp up use of electric cars. In August, after declaring that the U.S. must "move fast" to win the world's car-making future, [Biden announced a commitment from the auto industry](#) to raise gas mileage and cut tailpipe pollution between now and 2026.

Ford expects 40% of its global sales to be fully electric by 2030, while General Motors is aiming to sell only electric passenger vehicles by 2035. Stellantis, formerly Fiat Chrysler, has also pledged that more than 40% of its sales will be from electrified vehicles by 2030.

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HEADLINE	12/28 China local Covid cases rise for 4 <sup>th</sup> day
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-regulator-suspend-some-china-eastern-xiamenair-flights-due-covid-19-cases-2021-12-27/">https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-regulator-suspend-some-china-eastern-xiamenair-flights-due-covid-19-cases-2021-12-27/</a>
GIST	<p>BEIJING, Dec 28 (Reuters) - China's local coronavirus cases rose for a fourth day, with the majority of infections reported by Xian, a northwestern city that has put its 13 million people under lockdown.</p> <p>Xian reported 175 symptomatic cases for Monday, up from the previous day's 150. No Omicron infections have been announced yet from the more than 800 confirmed cases in Xian since Dec. 9.</p> <p>Case numbers in Xian are small compared with many clusters in other countries, but Chinese officials have imposed tough curbs on travel within the city and on leaving it, in line with national guidelines to immediately contain any COVID-19 outbreak.</p> <p>Some residents in Xian were anxious to know when they could next stock up on daily necessities such as vegetables, as officials had barred people from going out to shop during a new round of mass testing that started on Monday.</p> <p>Officials had said shopping could resume for people in less risky areas once test results came back negative, but did not say exactly when the suspension would be lifted. Prior to the restriction, each household had been allowed to send only one person out to shop for essentials every two days.</p> <p>"It feels like a long time," said a 22-year-old resident surnamed Jin.</p> <p>"The fact that I haven't yet been told when I could shop again makes me a bit anxious," Jin, who ran out of fresh greens by Tuesday and couldn't make orders online without waiting for nearly a week before delivery, told Reuters.</p>

	<p>Since last week, Xian residents have not been allowed to leave the city without clearance from their employer or community authorities. Officials have also banned non-essential vehicles.</p> <p>Zhang Boli, who advised the Chinese government in formulating early COVID-19 response and treatment strategies, told state media earlier this month that Xian may contain the outbreak by around mid-January.</p> <p>Nationwide, mainland China detected 182 local symptomatic cases for Monday, according to a statement by the National Health Commission, compared with 162 a day earlier.</p> <p>That was the highest daily count since the official daily bulletin started classifying asymptomatic cases separately at the end of March last year.</p> <p>China has disclosed only a handful of Omicron infections, mostly among international travellers and in the south.</p> <p>A national health official said earlier this month that local transmission caused by imported Omicron infection was found in the southern city of Guangzhou, without disclosing how many cases were found.</p> <p>An infectious disease doctor in the eastern province of Zhejiang said on Tuesday at a government-organized news briefing that Omicron cases arriving from overseas were detected in the province a week ago, without disclosing the number of infections.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 Russia court closes human rights group</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/world/europe/russia-memorial-human-rights.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/world/europe/russia-memorial-human-rights.html</a>
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — Russia’s Supreme Court on Tuesday ordered the liquidation of Memorial International, one of the nation’s oldest and most revered human rights organizations, which chronicled political repression and became a symbol of the country’s democratization that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.</p> <p>The decision comes after a year of broad crackdown on opposition in Russia and more than three decades after Memorial was founded by a group of Soviet dissidents who believed that the country needed to reconcile with its traumatic past to move forward. In particular, the group dedicated itself to preserving the memory of the many thousands of Russians who died or were persecuted in forced labor camps during the Stalin era.</p> <p>The judge’s ruling cited what it said were repeated violations of the foreign agents law. Passed in 2012, the law has been criticized by the country’s opposition as a vehicle designed by the Russian state to stifle all dissent in the country. It orders all organizations that receive foreign funding and engage in loosely defined political activity to label themselves as “foreign agents,” a designation that carries the stigma of being on the payroll of foreign governments.</p> <p>During the final court hearing, prosecutors said Memorial “creates a false image of the Soviet Union as of a terrorist state” and tries to “rehabilitate Nazi criminals.”</p> <p>Memorial has dismissed all the allegations against it as unfounded and called its persecution “politically motivated.”</p> <p>The decision came as protesters massed outside the courthouse.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 Cities pare back NYE celebrations again</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#cities-around-the-world-pare-back-new-year-celebrations-again">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#cities-around-the-world-pare-back-new-year-celebrations-again</a>



As the Omicron variant drives infection rates to their highest levels of the pandemic in many parts of the world, major cities have scaled down or canceled New Year's Eve events for a second consecutive year.

Only months ago, expanding Covid vaccinations and loosening travel rules had promised a return of raucous New Year gatherings amid hopes that the pandemic might finally be waning. But the emergence of Omicron — [the highly transmissible variant](#) that is now dominant in the United States and fueling record surges in many nations — has prompted governments to reinstate travel restrictions, mask mandates and bans on large gatherings.

Even as early studies suggest that Omicron produces less severe illness, experts warn that the staggering caseload could still overwhelm health systems. A number of Dec. 31 events have been canceled in countries where [caseloads are rising swiftly](#), including in Italy, where the 14-day average of new cases is up 128 percent, and in France, where cases are up by 48 percent, according to the Our World in Data Project at the University of Oxford.

In the United States, where daily cases have doubled over the past two weeks, some events have been canceled, but the annual celebration in Times Square in New York will go on, with attendance capped at 15,000.

Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, recommended on Monday that people "stay away" from large New Year's Eve parties, especially when it is not clear who has been vaccinated. [Speaking on CNN](#), Dr. Fauci said, "There will be other years to do that, but not this year."

As another 12 months living with the pandemic draws to a close, here's a look at how [Omicron](#) has forced some cities to change their plans for Dec. 31:

### **New York City**

Last week, [Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a downsizing](#) of the celebration in Times Square to at most 15,000 guests, nearly a quarter of the usual amount, who will be allowed in at 3 p.m. at the earliest. Attendees will be required to wear masks and show proof of full vaccination. Fox canceled its "New Year's Eve Toast & Roast 2022" live broadcast from Times Square. The network said in a [statement](#) that "the recent velocity of the spread of Omicron cases has made it impossible to produce a live special in Times Square that meets our standards."

### **Los Angeles**

Several Los Angeles County holiday events have been canceled, including the New Year's countdown in Grand Park, which will now be streamed.

### **Seattle**

For the second year in a row, there will be no crowds allowed at the [Space Needle's](#) fireworks show. People can watch on a livestream instead.

### **London**

Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, announced last week that the New Year's Eve event in Trafalgar Square was canceled, saying: "The safety of Londoners must come first."

### **Paris**

According to the broadcaster [France24](#), Paris has canceled its celebration, which was to include fireworks over the Champs-Élysées. Prime Minister Jean Castex also [announced](#) that large public parties would be banned on New Year's Eve.

### **Rome**

Celebrations have been scrapped in several Italian cities, including Rome and Venice. Outdoor events have been banned and nightclubs will be closed for the month of January.

### **Berlin**

[Berlin's annual New Year's Eve party at the Brandenburg Gate](#) will go on, but without any audience members. The performances will be live on television. Chancellor Olaf Scholz has also announced that gatherings will be limited to a maximum of 10 people starting Dec. 28.

### **Tokyo**

Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo typically attracts tens of thousands of people for one of the biggest New Year celebrations in the world. This year, like last year, the revelry has been called off. [Public drinking has been banned](#) in Shibuya on Dec. 31 and Jan. 1.

### **New Delhi**

The Delhi Disaster Management Authority has banned all social, political and cultural gatherings, including Christmas and New Year celebrations, [according to The Economic Times](#) newspaper. Restaurants and bars are allowed to operate only at half capacity.

### **Cape Town**

Cape Town is still allowing New Year's Eve gatherings, but [several restrictions](#) are in place. There is a curfew from 12 a.m. to 4 a.m., masks are required in public areas and nightclubs are closed.

### **Casablanca, Morocco**

The authorities [banned New Year's Eve celebrations](#) throughout the country, including in Casablanca, the most populous city. Restaurants will close 30 minutes before midnight, and there will be a curfew from midnight to 6 a.m.

### **Kampala, Uganda**

The national police force on Monday [announced a ban](#) on New Year's Eve fireworks across the country, including in Kampala, the capital. Nighttime religious services will also be prohibited.

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HEADLINE	12/27 Seattle experiences coldest day in 31yrs
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/weather/seattle-experiences-coldest-day-in-31-years/281-23c5a94c-3aba-40c3-a514-c95fe4c7cf23">https://www.king5.com/article/weather/seattle-experiences-coldest-day-in-31-years/281-23c5a94c-3aba-40c3-a514-c95fe4c7cf23</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Monday, Dec. 27 was the coldest day in Seattle in 31 years.</p> <p>The high temperature for the day was 23 degrees.</p> <p>The last time it was colder was Dec. 29, 1990 when the high only reached 22 degrees, according to the National Weather Service (NWS).</p> <p>The morning low of 17 degrees is the coldest temperature in Seattle since the city experienced a low of 14 degrees on Nov. 24, 2010, according to the NWS.</p> <p>Those cold temperatures will stick around for at least a few more days.</p> <p>After overnight lows in the teens, Tuesday's high will be in the 20s.</p> <p>Things begin to warm up slightly Wednesday, when highs reach the low 30s.</p> <p>Daytime temperatures will hover in the low 30s through Saturday.</p> <p>Sunday and Monday we could see daytime highs in the mid to upper 30s.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/27 Heavy demand for blood donations
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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/heavy-demand-blood-donations-due-snow/KADK6XTF6FBXRJLSVSOVWY23SE/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/heavy-demand-blood-donations-due-snow/KADK6XTF6FBXRJLSVSOVWY23SE/</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The recent weather impacting western Washington has local blood banks urging donors to help meet the demand for blood.</p> <p>Bloodworks Northwest said in the past 48 hours, over 500 appointments to donate were canceled, rescheduled or donors were unable to make it to their appointment.</p> <p>Their Type O supply is 900 units below operational levels, leaving them with less than a day of transfusable units.</p> <p>There are over 800 open appointments at Bloodworks Northwest this week and 1,200 open appointments next week.</p> <p>Although same-day appointments are available, please travel safely.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Messy roads could stick around all week</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/messy-roads-could-stick-around-all-week/EFTGS4V535D3RLP6IWR5232WII/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/messy-roads-could-stick-around-all-week/EFTGS4V535D3RLP6IWR5232WII/</a>
GIST	<p>A winter slushy mess has plagued the Puget Sound. After snow fell across Western Washington, the clean-up continues but the job isn't easy.</p> <p>"We continue to work hard on it and we're doing everything we can," Seattle DOT spokesperson Ethan Bergerson.</p> <p>In the Emerald City, the clean-up is off to a rough start as the staffing just isn't there.</p> <p>"Because a lot of staff were out of town or gearing up for the holidays and so that made it more of a challenging situation for us to get staffed up to respond to the snow," says Bergerson.</p> <p>And whether or not your neighborhood is cleaned up may depend on what neighborhood you live in.</p> <p>If you're far removed from those busy city streets, you're likely on your own.</p> <p>Bergerson says, "We prioritize which routes we're going to plow based on what's the most needed for emergency vehicles and the most number of people."</p> <p>In Pierce county, the focus is now on streets that could ice over.</p> <p>"We are going to be in these freezing temperatures for a while," says Deputy Darren Moss with the Pierce County Sheriff's Office.</p> <p>With so much snow and slush sticking around, first responders want to make sure drivers are cautious.</p> <p>Moss says, "Go at a slow easy pace so that you can make it through the side roads and get to the main road where the salt has been poured on the road and things like that."</p> <p>With temperatures expected to stay below freezing for several days, drivers in Snohomish county don't expect to see clear roads anytime soon.</p> <p>"It is a little precarious because we're slipping a little bit as we're trying to get into gear after the stop signs," says Kristin Decker who was out driving Monday night. "You got to stay back from some people because you will run into them."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 WSP: hundreds of crashes Puget Sound</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/troopers-respond-to-166-crashes-in-pierce-thurston-counties">https://www.q13fox.com/news/troopers-respond-to-166-crashes-in-pierce-thurston-counties</a>
GIST	<p>PIERCE COUNTY, Wash. - Troopers responded to hundreds of crashes over the holiday weekend throughout the Puget Sound.</p> <p>Trooper Robert Reyer said there were 166 collisions and speeding was the main reason for many of the spin-out crashes.</p> <p>Trooper Rick Johnson said that troopers in King County alone responded to 184 crashes and there was a total of 615 other incidents such as cars stuck in the snow.</p> <p>"Stay home if you can! If not, #SlowDown," Johnson tweeted.</p> <p>Trooper Katherine Weatherwax said troopers in District 8 responded to 89 collisions in Kitsap, Mason, Gray Harbor, Jefferson and Clallam counties.</p> <p>Winter weather over the weekend has left roads covered with snow and ice.</p> <p>"Let's try to stay safer today," Reyer said. "Please slow down on the icy and snowy roads."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Hard freeze sets in; more snow for areas</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/weather/hard-freeze-sets-in-more-snow-for-some">https://www.q13fox.com/weather/hard-freeze-sets-in-more-snow-for-some</a>
GIST	<p><b>Seattle</b> - Bitter cold temperatures have set in across the Puget Sound area with many spots Monday waking up to temperatures in the teens and single digits.</p> <p>The daylight hours will stay quiet today, with high temperatures only making it into the mid 20s in the central and south sound. The north sound will struggle to make it out of the teens.</p> <p>Another chance for snow arrives at the coast and Olympic Peninsula around sunset and will push into the south sound later this evening.</p> <p>Snow totals will be light, but this next weak system will still likely impact the roads in the south sound for the Tuesday morning commute.</p> <p>Looking ahead, there isn't much of a thaw happening for the next several days. Another wet system will impact the region on Thursday, likely starting as snow and then transitioning to a rain/snow mix for the afternoon as temps rise above freezing. The problem is that overnight temps will drop into the 20s again, leading to potentially very icy conditions Friday morning.</p> <p>Next weekend will bring a chance for showers with gradually warming temperatures.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Some King Co. Covid test sites close</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/covid-test-sites-close-as-omicron-cases-ramp-up-in-king-county">https://www.q13fox.com/news/covid-test-sites-close-as-omicron-cases-ramp-up-in-king-county</a>
GIST	<p><b>SEATTLE</b> - One of the hottest commodities in <a href="#">Seattle</a> on Monday was a <a href="#">COVID-19</a> test appointment.</p> <p>Testing sites across Seattle, and King County began to shut down as a result of cold weather and leftover snow. As of Monday night, we know at least nine sites will remain closed on Tuesday too. That means a crunch at the handful of free testing sites left running.</p> <p>"There was a huge cue of cars," explained Sameer Dharur. "This is the perfect storm in a way, in which, a lot of bad factors have come together at the right time."</p>

Those factors: a growing number of COVID-19 cases fueled by omicron, and a rare winter blast.

Dharur got an e-mail around 6 a.m. telling him the site his parents were set to test at, had been shut down. They are planning to catch a flight to India on Wednesday, but without a negative test within 72 hours of the flight, they can't board.

That sent Dharur to one of the few locations that remained open, only to find out they were delayed opening by 90 minutes – the line was already growing.

Eventually Dharur gave up; his family will now pay roughly \$200 per test at the airport on Tuesday. He fears that it is not an option for many who could be sick.

"The vaccination campaign has been very, very efficient in the City of Seattle," he said. "I'm not sure if the same can be said of testing. Having to wait several days for it essentially means you are going to be possibly infecting other people in the meantime."

In addition to a number of sites closing in Seattle, King County lost testing sites in Enumclaw, Renton and Federal Way early Monday morning. A few hours later closures were announced in Bellevue, Kent-Des Moines, Shoreline and Sammamish.

At the SODO location – one of the few locations open in Seattle – the line stretched down the block. A handful of people told FOX 13 that they waited more than two hours.

In addition to the wait, there was confusion over where to line up – two lines spawned which led to people honking horns and arguing over where the line was supposed to form.

""We waited two hours until we got to the corner just 100 feet from here," explained Guy Gershwin, who needed a test for his mother before his son could return to daycare. "We realized that some people cut the line and tried to skip the 2-hour wait. That's the honking you hear!"

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 California: dramatic spike Covid cases</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-27/california-coronavirus-cases-hospitalizations-spiking">https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-27/california-coronavirus-cases-hospitalizations-spiking</a>
GIST	<p>An <a href="#">explosion of new coronavirus cases</a> fueled by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant has triggered a sharp uptick in COVID-19 <a href="#">hospitalizations across California</a>, prompting renewed warnings and calls for caution from public health officials.</p> <p>Over the weeklong period ending Sunday, California reported an average of 11,914 new coronavirus cases per day — a 73% jump from two weeks ago, <a href="#">according to data</a> compiled by The Times.</p> <p>And that influx of infections is starting to take its toll on hospitals. There were 4,001 coronavirus-positive patients <a href="#">hospitalized statewide</a> on Sunday, a nearly 14% increase in one week. COVID-19 hospitalizations haven't been this high since early October.</p> <p>The recent metrics “make it crystal clear that we are heading into very challenging times over the winter holidays,” said Los Angeles County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer.</p> <p>“While many will be protected against the most severe illness from Omicron because they are fully vaccinated and boosted where eligible, very high case numbers can easily cause significant stress to the healthcare system if even a small percentage of those infected require hospital care,” she said in a recent statement.</p> <p><b>Cases spiking</b></p> <p>In L.A. County, new coronavirus cases dramatically increased in the lead-up to Christmas.</p>

On Tuesday, 3,052 new cases were reported; on Wednesday, 6,509; Thursday, 8,633; Friday, 9,988; Saturday, 11,930; and Sunday, 8,891. And officials warned that those eye-popping counts over the weekend are actually an undercount because of delays in reporting over the holiday.

At its peak during [last winter's surge](#), L.A. County was averaging about 16,000 new coronavirus cases a day. But the latest wave could easily top that, Ferrer said.

"If our case numbers continue to increase at a rapid pace over this next week, we could be looking at case numbers we have never seen before — well over 20,000 cases a day by the end of this year," she said Wednesday.

The percentage of coronavirus tests in Los Angeles County coming back positive has risen dramatically. For the seven-day period that ended Sunday, 10.8% of coronavirus tests had positive results. By comparison, for the seven-day period that ended on Dec. 20, 3.4% of tests returned positive results.

[According to data](#) released Thursday by the California Department of Public Health, at least three state health systems have reported that Omicron appears to account for 50% to 70% of new cases.

### **Hospitalizations**

Los Angeles County's COVID-19 hospitalizations have also increased significantly since Dec. 1, from 569 to 904 on Christmas Day, an increase of 59%. Hospitalizations spiked further Sunday, to 966.

But the latest number is far below what it was a year ago, when vaccinations had just been introduced and were in sharply limited supply. On Christmas Day 2020, there were 6,815 people with COVID-19 in L.A. County's hospitals, up from 2,572 on Dec. 1, 2020. At its peak on Jan. 5, L.A. County logged 8,098 COVID-19 hospitalizations, a time that coincided with overwhelmed hospitals and [overflowing morgues](#). Currently, Southern California's COVID-19 hospitalizations are increasing faster than the San Francisco Bay Area's.

Since Dec. 1, the hospitalization rate in Southern California has risen by about 41%, from 7.7 hospitalizations for every 100,000 residents to 10.8.

By contrast, the Greater San Francisco Bay Area has seen its rate climb by 26%, from 3.8 to 4.8. Experts say it's cause for concern when the rate is 5 or greater.

The [Inland Empire](#) has among the highest COVID-19 hospitalization rates in Southern California; San Bernardino County's rate is 20, and Riverside County's is 15. San Diego County's rate is 11; Los Angeles and Ventura counties, 9; and Orange County, 8.

Some experts are expressing hope that areas with high vaccination and masking rates will not be devastated by a surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations.

Dr. Robert Wachter, chair of the UC San Francisco Department of Medicine, wrote Friday that while coronavirus case rates are rising sharply in San Francisco, hospital numbers remain low.

The bad news, Wachter said, is that Omicron is spreading quickly in San Francisco. The good news is that Omicron appears to lead to milder illness, particularly in vaccinated populations, Wachter [wrote](#) on Twitter.

Dr. Anthony Fauci on Sunday told ABC that recent data from Britain show that, in its Omicron wave, a lower percentage of newly infected people are needing hospitalizations.

"Interestingly, the duration of hospital stay was lower, the need for oxygen was lower," Fauci [said](#) on ABC's "This Week." Still, because Omicron is causing such a high volume of new infections, the variant

could find many more people who haven't been immunized and could still result in hospitals becoming overwhelmed.

Unvaccinated people "are the most vulnerable ones when you have a virus that is extraordinarily effective in getting to people and infecting them the way Omicron is," Fauci said in the televised interview. Omicron "might still lead to a lot of hospitalizations in the United States."

Fauci said on ABC's "Good Morning America" that the Omicron surge is likely to get worse before it gets better.

Though South Africa's cases are declining, they're still going up in Britain, and the U.S. usually lags somewhat behind Britain.

"In other words, what happens there generally happens here a couple to three weeks later," Fauci said. "The way it's going up right now — it's going to get worse before it gets better. That's for sure. We don't expect things are going to turn around in a few days to a week. It likely will take much longer than that, but that's unpredictable."

Evidence continues to mount that vaccinated people who have received their booster shot, but still get infected, generally have no symptoms or mild symptoms, Fauci said.

But Fauci said he remained concerned about severe illness among people who are not vaccinated.

Fauci said medical officials in South Africa are also seeing more hospitalizations among children infected with the coronavirus, echoing new data out of New York seeing a jump in hospitalizations among children, most of whom are not fully vaccinated.

"That's one of the reasons why we say ... if you have a child from 5 to 11, to please get that child vaccinated to prevent them from getting anything that even resembles a serious illness," Fauci said.

### **Geographic differences**

Wachter said he'd be far less upbeat in areas with lower vaccination rates. San Francisco has one of California's highest vaccination rates, with 88% of the population having received at least one dose. But other areas of the state have lower rates; L.A. County's is 76%; Orange County, 75%; Ventura County, 74%; Fresno County, 65%; Riverside County, 64%; San Bernardino County, 60%; and Kern County, 56%. "I'd be ... far more scared if I wasn't vaxxed and boosted. The unvaxxed are playing a risky hand," Wachter [wrote](#).

In San Francisco, [Wachter said that](#) still expects a bump in hospitalizations, but it "seems unlikely it'll be overwhelming here."

In Los Angeles County, officials have expressed concerns about the rising case numbers.

Ferrer said last week that L.A. County can manage rising case numbers without the hospital system being overwhelmed, if more people get vaccinated and boosted, wear masks in indoor public settings and outdoor crowded areas, and avoid large indoor gatherings.

### **Testing**

Amid the ongoing surge, L.A. County officials announced they would [take steps to expand testing](#), effective Friday — such as extending the hours of operation at testing sites across the county, "additional week and weekend dates," as well as more mobile testing units dispatched to "hard-hit areas."

The county health department is also relaunching a home test collection program in which residents [can request](#) an at-home nasal test swab kit and have it delivered by FedEx within two days.

	<p>County health officials said that demand for testing has climbed as residents prepare for holiday celebrations.</p> <p>“L.A. County residents are doing right by getting tested as a precaution before gathering, if they have been exposed and at the first sign of symptoms,” Dr. Christina Ghaly, director of the county’s Department of Health Services, said in a news release. “We will continue to closely monitor testing needs and adjust capacity as needed in the coming weeks.”</p> <p>California is <a href="#">also preparing to provide rapid tests</a> for students in K-12 public schools and expand hours at busy screening sites.</p> <p>“After our kids have enjoyed the holidays ... we want to make sure they come back in as good a shape as they left, meaning we want to make sure that we are testing our kids and preparing them to come back,” Gov. Gavin Newsom said last week.</p> <p>Newsom emphasized California’s commitment to keeping schools open for in-person instruction — a pledge reiterated in a joint statement his office released Wednesday morning from education-related organizations including the California State Parent Teacher Assn., California Teachers Assn., SEIU California, the state charter schools association and the California School Boards Assn.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 Australia Covid numbers hit new peak</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/australia-covid-numbers-surge-omicron-outbreak-strains-domestic-politics-2021-12-28/">https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/australia-covid-numbers-surge-omicron-outbreak-strains-domestic-politics-2021-12-28/</a>
GIST	<p>SYDNEY, Dec 28 (Reuters) - Australia recorded another record surge in COVID-19 infections on Tuesday as an outbreak of the highly infectious Omicron variant disrupted reopening of the economy, while state leaders argued over domestic border controls.</p> <p>The country reported 11,264 new cases of the coronavirus in the previous day, according to a Reuters calculation of state figures, once again surpassing its peak of a day earlier, as it grapples with a planned reopening while the new variant rages.</p> <p>There were five COVID-19 deaths reported, taking the total fatalities to just over 2,200 since the start of the pandemic. Authorities did not specify whether any of the new deaths were related to the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The Omicron variant, which medical experts say is more transmissible but less virulent than previous strains, began to spread in Australia just as the country got underway with plans to reopen for good after nearly two years of stop-start lockdowns.</p> <p>With the resumption of rising case numbers - despite a vaccination rate of more than 90% for Australians aged over 16 - the country's state leaders have brought back some containment measures like mandatory mask-wearing and QR code check-ins at public venues.</p> <p>The rising case numbers have also led to mandatory self-isolation for thousands of workers in the hospitality, entertainment and airline sectors - the sectors worst hit by lockdowns - resulting in cancelled theatre shows, closed restaurants and postponed flights.</p> <p>The outbreak has also fuelled a resumption of fractious domestic politics which defined much of the pandemic as some states resist calls to remove internal border controls.</p> <p>New South Wales (NSW), home to Sydney and a third of Australia's 25 million population, called on neighbouring Queensland to shift from mandatory clinical testing at the point of origin to on-the-spot rapid antigen testing for people travelling there.</p>



	<p>NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard said a quarter of clinical tests in his state were "tourism tests" for asymptomatic people, bringing huge pressure of the health system, long testing queues and wait times of several days for results.</p> <p>In one case, a Sydney testing clinic sent incorrect negative test results to 400 COVID-positive people, then prematurely sent 950 people negative results when 486 were actually positive. The bungle was the result of "human error, and when people are under pressure, human errors are more frequent", said Hazzard.</p> <p>He called on Queensland to scrap mandatory clinical tests immediately, rather than after Jan. 1 as planned, but the Queensland authorities said the policy was working.</p> <p>Queensland Health Minister Yvette D'Ath instead said the state would remove another testing rule for interstate arrivals: people arriving in the state would no longer have to take a virus test five days after arriving.</p> <p>Australia's international border remains effectively closed, but Australian nationals may return without mandatory hotel quarantine and the country has said it would allow certain skilled workers and foreign students in.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Death toll from Brazil flooding rises</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/death-toll-brazil-flooding-rises-bahias-worst-disaster-ever-2021-12-27/">https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/death-toll-brazil-flooding-rises-bahias-worst-disaster-ever-2021-12-27/</a>
GIST	<p>ITABUNA, Brazil, Dec 27 (Reuters) - The death toll from floods hammering northeast Brazil rose to 20 on Monday, as the governor of Bahia state declared it the worst disaster in the state's history and rescuers braced for more rain in the coming days.</p> <p>Much of Bahia, home to about 15 million people, has suffered from intermittent flooding for weeks, after a long drought gave way to record rains. Flooding in some areas intensified late on Christmas Eve and early on Christmas Day after a <a href="#">pair of dams gave way</a>, sending residents scrambling for higher ground.</p> <p>Rescue workers patrolled in small dinghies around the city of Itabuna, in southern Bahia, plucking residents from their homes, including some who escaped through second-floor windows.</p> <p>Bahia Governor Rui Costa said on Twitter that 72 municipalities were in a state of emergency.</p> <p>"Unfortunately, we're living through the worst disaster that has ever occurred in the history of Bahia," he wrote.</p> <p>Manfredo Santana, a lieutenant-colonel in Bahia's firefighting corps, told Reuters that emergency workers had rescued 200 people in just three nearby towns. The heavy currents of the swollen Cachoeira River complicated rescue efforts.</p> <p>"It's difficult to maneuver even with jet skis," he said. "Rescue teams had to retreat in certain moments."</p> <p>Bahia's civil defense agency said on Monday afternoon that 20 people had died in 11 separate municipalities.</p> <p>Newspaper O Globo, citing a state firefighting official, said that authorities are monitoring an additional 10 dams for any signs they may collapse.</p> <p>The scrutiny of public infrastructure and urban planning comes just a couple years after the collapse of a mining dam in neighboring Minas Gerais state <a href="#">killed some 270 people</a>.</p>

	In televised remarks, Costa, the Bahia governor, attributed the chaotic scenes in part to "errors that have been committed over the course of years."
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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 Indonesia lifts ban Boeing 737 MAX plane</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-allow-boeings-737-max-fly-again-after-fatal-crash-2021-12-28/">https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-allow-boeings-737-max-fly-again-after-fatal-crash-2021-12-28/</a>
GIST	<p>JAKARTA, Dec 28 (Reuters) - Indonesia has lifted a ban on the Boeing 737 MAX, its transport ministry said on Tuesday, three years after the crash of one of the aircraft operated by domestic carrier Lion Air with the loss of all 189 people on board.</p> <p>Aviation authorities around the world grounded the aircraft months later after a similarly deadly accident in March 2019 involving one of the aircraft operated by Ethiopian Airlines.</p> <p>The approval for the aircraft's return in Indonesia comes months after it returned to service in the United States and Europe, and follows more recent lifting of grounding orders in countries including Australia, Japan, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Ethiopia.</p> <p>The lifting of the ban was effective immediately and it follows the evaluation of changes to the aircraft's system by regulators, the ministry said in a statement.</p> <p>Airlines must follow airworthiness directives and inspect their planes before they can fly the 737 MAX again, it said, adding that the government would also inspect the planes.</p> <p>Privately owned Lion Air, which operated 10 of the 737 MAX planes before the ban, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>National flag carrier Garuda Indonesia said it had no plans to reintroduce the plane to its fleet as it focuses on debt restructuring, chief executive Irfan Setiাপutra told Reuters.</p> <p>The state-controlled airline, which had operated one 737 MAX before the ban, has said it plans to cut its fleet from 142 to 66 planes under the plan.</p> <p>Anton Sahadi, a relative of one of the passengers on board the Lion Air plane that crashed, urged the government to ensure proper management of the risks before returning the aircraft to service "so that no planes of this model will ever fall and kill people again".</p> <p>"The trauma is still there," he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 US, China squabble: 'diplomatic boycott'</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/28/china-winter-olympics-2022-diplomatic-boycott/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/28/china-winter-olympics-2022-diplomatic-boycott/</a>
GIST	<p>U.S. officials said that Washington's "diplomatic boycott" of the Beijing Olympics will remain in place, with no high-level official spectators, though there are plans to send consular and diplomatic security support staffers.</p> <p>China's Foreign Ministry on Monday had derided the boycott as a "farce," saying it had received visa applications from U.S. personnel for the 2022 Winter Games, which kick off Feb. 4. But a spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in Beijing said in a statement Tuesday there will be no "diplomatic or official representation given [China's] ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, and other human rights abuses."</p>

Some consular and security officers will go to assist athletes and coaches, the spokesperson said, adding that any visa applications would be for them. “It is standard to have those personnel on the ground, and those personnel do not constitute official or diplomatic representation at the Games.”

The absence of high-level U.S. officials is largely symbolic and doesn’t affect the ability of American athletes to compete in the Olympics. But it does reflect the testy relations between Washington and Beijing. When China hosted the 2008 Olympics at a time of warmer ties, president George W. Bush attended and called it [a “very uplifting experience.”](#)

Washington’s snub of the Games is a sore point for Chinese officials, who say no human rights violations have taken place in Xinjiang or elsewhere in the country. U.S. allies such as Australia, Britain and Japan have [followed Washington’s lead](#), saying they also will not send government delegations.

Chinese officials have criticized the absences as an example of American political manipulation. They also say there can’t be a U.S. boycott because Washington hasn’t been invited. “One can’t decline an invitation without first receiving one,” Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Hua Chunying [tweeted](#) this month.

On Monday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said [at a news briefing](#) that Beijing had received visa applications from U.S. personnel.

“Now with regard to the U.S. request to send a team of government officials to China and their visa applications, the Chinese side will handle them in accordance with international customary practice, relevant regulations and the principle of reciprocity,” he said.

Human rights conditions in China’s northwestern Xinjiang region remain a flash point in U.S.-China relations, with President Biden [signing into law](#) last week legislation banning imports from the region unless the importer can prove they were not made with forced labor.

Uyghurs in the region have alleged they were forced to work in factories on threat of detention, as part of a sweeping “reeducation” campaign targeting the minority group. Xinjiang authorities say all residents of the region work voluntarily. The United States, along with several European legislatures, has declared China’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims to be a genocide.

U.S. chipmaker Intel [apologized](#) on Thursday for asking suppliers to avoid sourcing from Xinjiang, after it became the latest target of fury from Chinese state media and Internet users.

China has been preparing for months to put its best foot forward for the Olympics, including [plans to ensure blue skies](#) by suspending factory production across the country’s northeast. Athletes, coaches and others arriving for the Games will be kept in a [“closed-loop management system”](#) for coronavirus prevention, a bubble that keeps them separated from the rest of the country.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 UN seeks Myanmar massacre investigation</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/27/myanmar-massacre-save-the-children/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/27/myanmar-massacre-save-the-children/</a>
GIST	<p>The United Nations called for an investigation following reports that at least 35 people, including a child, were killed in a massacre by Myanmar’s military on Christmas Eve. Two workers for Save the Children, a humanitarian organization, remain among the missing.</p> <p>Photos of the charred remains of victims in torched vehicles <a href="#">circulated on social media</a> in Myanmar, where activists say more than 1,300 people have died amid unrest since the <a href="#">military seized power</a> on Feb. 1 and ousted the country’s civilian leader, <a href="#">Aung San Suu Kyi</a>.</p> <p>“I condemn this grievous incident and all attacks against civilians throughout the country, which are prohibited under international humanitarian law,” U.N. humanitarian affairs chief Martin Griffiths <a href="#">said in a statement Sunday</a>.</p>

He called for “a thorough and transparent investigation into the incident so that perpetrators can be swiftly brought to justice,” at a time when “millions of people in Myanmar remain in dire need of humanitarian support.”

The U.S. Embassy in Myanmar, [in a statement Sunday](#), called the killings a “barbaric attack” and said it would “continue to press for accountability for the perpetrators of the ongoing campaign of violence against the people.”

In Friday’s attack, security forces reportedly rounded up civilians in Mo So, a village in the eastern state of Kayah, where people have been displaced by military offensives and clashes with armed groups.

A villager who visited the scene [told the Associated Press](#) that the occupants of three vehicles had been arrested, shot and burned in the vehicles. They had been en route to camps for internally displaced people in the western part of nearby Hpruso township, he said.

London-based Save the Children said the military had attacked a car carrying two workers for the organization.

“Two of our staff, who were on the way back to the office after conducting humanitarian response work in a nearby community, were caught up in the incident and remain missing,” the aid organization [said in a statement](#) Saturday. “We have confirmation that their private vehicle was attacked and burned out. The military reportedly forced people from their cars, arrested some, killed others and burned their bodies.”

The aid agency, which placed the death toll at 38, said it was “horrified at the violence carried out against innocent civilians and our staff.” It said its own investigation was underway.

Save the Children has been working in Myanmar since 1995. It said Saturday that it had suspended its work in the area and in parts of nearby Magway and Kayin.

The organization said Monday that it did not have additional comment.

Myanmar’s government has not commented on the allegations, the AP reported. But the country’s state-run Myanma Alinn daily newspaper reported Saturday that the military torched seven cars in fighting with guerrilla forces in Mo So on Friday, according to the AP.

A [Washington Post investigation](#) published in December reported that Myanmar’s military has carried out a premeditated campaign of arson and killing targeting civilians in western Chin state since September.

By analyzing more than 300 videos and photos, satellite imagery, eyewitness accounts and military planning documents, The Post found that the attacks were planned as early as June and that soldiers were given orders to “clear the region,” similar to the military’s 2017 operation against Rohingya Muslims.

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HEADLINE	12/27 DOH: 834,235 cases, 9801 deaths
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256881447.html">https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256881447.html</a>
GIST	<p>The Washington State Department of Health reported 3,847 new COVID-19 cases Monday and 17 deaths since they were last tallied on Christmas Eve.</p> <p>Monday marked the fifth consecutive day of big case numbers in the state. The state reported 4,150 cases on Dec. 23, 5,369 cases on Dec. 24, 6,235 cases on Christmas and 5,052 cases on Sunday.</p> <p>As of Monday, statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus are 834,235 cases and 9,801 deaths. The case total includes 99,497 infections listed as probable. Death data is considered complete only through Dec. 10. DOH revises previous case and death counts daily.</p>

HEADLINE	<b>12/27 King Co. Covid infections skyrocket</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/record-number-of-covid-infections-reported-in-king-county/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/record-number-of-covid-infections-reported-in-king-county/</a>
GIST	<p>Coronavirus infections in King County have skyrocketed in the past week as the omicron variant continues to surge, flying past the county's previous highest case number, according to county data updated Monday.</p> <p>The county has seen a 195% increase in cases in the past seven days, averaging 1,586 infections per day, <a href="#">according to the county's COVID-19 data dashboard</a>. It's unclear how many of those cases are attributed to omicron, but <a href="#">local health experts have been predicting</a> a "rapid surge" from the variant that could overwhelm the region's health care systems and disrupt businesses and schools as employees get sick.</p> <p>The recent spike marks the highest number of daily cases in King County since the beginning of the pandemic. The county recorded 2,267 confirmed and probable coronavirus cases last Thursday, about three-and-a-half times the peak during the delta wave, which hit a seven-day average of about 630 cases in late August.</p> <p>Meanwhile, incomplete data from the state Department of Health showed 6,235 new cases statewide on Friday, which would be another record.</p> <p>In a statement Monday, Public Health – Seattle &amp; King County added that the figures are likely an underestimate because there have been delays in reporting, and rapid, over-the-counter tests were not included in the data.</p> <p>"I know this news of a new surge of cases is coming after two long and exhausting years of our community working so hard to protect one another," Dennis Worsham, interim director of King County's health department, said in a statement. "... If you are vaccinated and boosted, you are doing your part both to protect yourself and all those around you."</p> <p>On Christmas Eve, 13% of UW Medicine's collected samples in Seattle returned positive for the coronavirus, the highest positivity rate the sites have ever seen, said Dr. Patrick Mathias, vice chair of clinical operations for the UW's Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology, <a href="#">on Monday</a>.</p> <p>The highly transmissible omicron variant surpassed delta and <a href="#">became the dominant coronavirus variant in King County last week</a>. Dr. John Lynch, Harborview Medical Center's medical director for infection prevention and control, said omicron will likely outpace delta statewide in a "matter of days to weeks."</p> <p>Recent spread has generally hit South King County cities harder than Seattle, Shoreline, Kirkland, Redmond, Bellevue and other Eastside cities. Auburn, Kent and Federal Way, for example, have an infection rate of about 14,000 cases per 100,000 residents — compared to about 6,700 cases per 100,000 in Seattle.</p> <p>In addition, while more fully vaccinated people are testing positive for the virus, county data shows unvaccinated people still pose a higher risk of transmission. As of mid-December, fully vaccinated people were becoming infected with the coronavirus at a rate of about 15.3 cases per 100,000 people — more than triple the rate of late November — while unvaccinated people were getting sick at a rate of about 81.6 cases per 100,000, <a href="#">according to the county dashboard</a>.</p> <p>While the vast majority of recent cases have not resulted in hospitalization, the county's COVID hospitalizations are also again on the rise. Last week, Public Health – Seattle &amp; King County reported a 2% increase in hospitalizations over the week before. On Monday, the county confirmed a 58% increase in the past week, with nearly 80 hospitalizations since Thursday.</p>

This month's rise in infections and hospitalizations hasn't yet translated into higher death rates, the county reported, though in the past there's been about a monthlong gap between a change in case rates and death rates.

Statewide COVID data hasn't been updated since last week because of the Dec. 24 holiday, but it last showed the seven-day average infection rate increased slightly between Dec. 4 and Dec. 13, from 112.5 cases per 100,000 people to 116.8 cases per 100,000, according to data from the state Department of Health.

Seattle scientists and virologists have been predicting a significant omicron surge for the past few weeks and continue to urge people to get vaccinated and boosted.

Early reports show the illness caused by omicron [might be milder than that caused by the delta variant](#), though experts remained largely unsure of the variant's severity. In addition, county health officer Dr. Jeff Duchin said last week that omicron's high rate of transmissibility could soon be a problem for the region's already strained hospitals.

Nationwide, omicron has become the dominant strain and is causing nearly vertical case growth in several U.S. cities, with figures doubling every two to three days, [The New York Times reported last week](#).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday updated its guidance for isolating and quarantining, saying it's shortening the recommended time for isolation from 10 days to five days if asymptomatic, followed by five days of mask-wearing around others.

The change, the CDC said, is "motivated by science demonstrating that the majority of SARS-CoV-2 transmission occurs early in the course of illness."

For people who have been exposed to the coronavirus but have not received a booster shot, the CDC is also recommending quarantining for five days followed by "strict" mask use for another five days. Those who have been boosted do not need to quarantine following an exposure, but should wear a mask for 10 days after being exposed, the CDC said.

The CDC noted that early data from South Africa and the U.K. shows two doses of an mRNA vaccine are about 35% effective at preventing infection, while an additional booster ups efficacy to about 75%.

New York, [which has reported record numbers recently and reinstated mask mandates earlier this month](#), confirmed a high of 49,708 new cases on Christmas Eve.

The nation's high for average daily cases was set in January at 251,232 infections. In comparison, some estimates predict the country could reach 1 million cases per day this winter.

The alarming surge has prompted Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Joe Biden's medical adviser, to [suggest a domestic travel vaccination mandate should be considered](#), and that people should try to avoid large New Year's Eve parties this week.

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HEADLINE	12/27 Retired cop anger: Redmond cops in killing
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/wheres-the-justice-retired-police-commander-confused-angry-over-daughters-death-at-hands-of-redmond-officers/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/wheres-the-justice-retired-police-commander-confused-angry-over-daughters-death-at-hands-of-redmond-officers/</a>
GIST	Andrea Churna thought someone was trying to kill her when she called Redmond police for help the night of Sept. 20, 2020. Raised around cops, she did what she was asked to do when police arrived to find her armed with a handgun.



She put the weapon down, walked out of her apartment unarmed, clad in a T-shirt and yoga pants, hands up, and laid face down on the carpeted hallway floor outside her door — “proned out” as officers at the scene described it.

None of that kept police from killing her. An officer, just 18 months out of the police academy, shot the 39-year-old mother six times with a high-powered rifle as she lay on the floor 30 feet away. She had been in obvious distress and was asking for her ex-husband.

“She called them for help,” said an emotional Michael Thomas, Churna’s father, as he sat at the dining room table in his home in Port Orchard. “And they killed her for it. This is a nightmare for us. Where is the justice for my daughter?”

More than a year later, Thomas is dismissive of the process surrounding the investigation into his daughter’s death. He’s frustrated that nobody can tell him whether the officers involved will be held accountable for what he believes was an unnecessary and excessive use of force against an unarmed, mentally disturbed woman who had asked for help and was trying to surrender.

While any father would feel that way in his position, Thomas’ opinion carries a certain authority — he’s a retired Michigan State Police commander who in a distinguished 32-year career investigated or oversaw investigations into dozens of police shootings and homicides himself.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Thomas. “Where are the charges? The facts are there. Andrea grew up in a law enforcement family. I feel guilty because her expectation was that if you called police, they would come and help.”

The shooting was investigated by the King County Sheriff’s Office, whose detectives repeatedly expressed frustration over the lack of cooperation of the Redmond officers and interference by their union attorney, according to sheriff’s reports. They turned an admittedly incomplete investigation over to the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office last spring. Prosecutors have declined to decide whether to pursue criminal charges against the officers pending a coroner’s inquest — a process stalled since 2017 and currently mired in procedural knots.

Fifteen months after the shooting, the officer who killed Churna, 26-year-old Daniel Mendoza, has declined to give a statement to sheriff’s investigators or be interviewed about why he pulled the trigger. Several other officers at the scene — the only witnesses since there were no civilians in the hallway, no surveillance cameras and none of the officers wore body cameras — were sent home that night without talking to investigators.

Police officers enjoy the same Fifth Amendment protections against self-incrimination as all citizens.

They were not admonished against talking to one another and most didn’t provide written statements for six days, after they had all consulted with the same guild attorney. Some written statements didn’t come in for months. Several officers there that night declined to sit for follow-up interviews or provide any additional information to outside investigators.

“The statements that have been provided to us up to this point are not adequate or conducive for us to conduct a thorough investigation,” wrote King County sheriff’s Detective Sarah Gerlitz in an email to her supervisors Nov. 14, 2020, more than six weeks after the shooting.

In most criminal investigations, potential suspects are generally separated — as the sheriff’s detectives attempted here — or otherwise asked not to speak with one another to avoid collusion or dilution of recollection. In addition, the routine practice of [delaying questioning of officers involved in using force also is controversial](#); additional time is rarely afforded citizens suspected of violent crimes.

“All of those statements are suspect,” said Kim Zak, an attorney hired by Churna’s parents, who are planning a lawsuit.

A review of several hundred pages of investigative reports, diagrams, crime-scene photographs and dispatch calls and logs obtained by The Seattle Times through a public disclosure request showed most of those officers continue their silence today.

This past September, after the sheriff's criminal investigation was completed, [Redmond Chief Darrell Lowe announced he was launching an internal investigation](#) into the shooting, stating that he had employed the Force Science Institute out of Illinois to "provide an independent force review and analysis" of the shooting.

However, FSI has been denounced by civil rights attorneys, psychologists and the Department of Justice for its methods and conclusions. [A 2015 New York Times investigation](#) pointed out that foundation consultants, in hundreds of cases involving police shootings, almost universally sided with the officer, even when the suspect was unarmed.

The results of the internal investigation are pending.

Chief Lowe, in a statement last week, stated that the Churna shooting will also be the subject of a coroner's inquest. However, it rests at No. 43 in a list of 52 pending inquests into law enforcement-related deaths in King County since 2017, and [it could be years before](#) an inquest jury hears the case and the prosecutor's office gets its recommendation.

### **Trying to rebuild**

Andrea Churna had moved into the Modera Apartments in Redmond in August 2020 after moving out of her parent's house in Port Orchard. A graduate of Vanderbilt University, she was a successful IT and tech recruiter who earned a six-figure salary. Churna was attempting to rebuild her life after a period where she struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder and other emotional and psychological issues, according to her family and the sheriff's investigation.

She remained close with her ex-husband, Timothy Churna, a senior attorney at Microsoft, who shared joint custody of their 7-year-old son. Tim Churna had been taking care of the boy while his mother got back on her feet after she returned to Washington after briefly living in California. While they had separated nearly six years earlier and divorced the previous year, Tim Churna said they spoke almost daily and texted frequently.

In California, Churna had been stalked by a former boyfriend, a mixed martial arts fighter, her ex-husband said. She would obsess over it. In irrational moments, according to police interviews with friends and family, she was convinced a "network" of people were attempting to kidnap her and her son and force them into sex slavery.

"The thing is, she recognized she might not be thinking clearly," Tim Churna said. "She let me have our son full-time for a period so she could work through this. She was highly functional. She knew some of this was irrational."

It was during one of those periods that she moved home with her parents. Thomas, her father, said she wanted to be able to protect herself and thought she might feel safer if she had a gun, so he helped her buy a 9-mm Smith & Wesson semiautomatic pistol and taught her to shoot it.

After several months at home, feeling better and seeing a doctor, Churna moved from Port Orchard to the upscale Modera Apartments, settling into a small, one-bedroom unit on the fourth floor, with a balcony overlooking an enclosed courtyard.

The night of the shooting, Tim Churna said he had spoken with Andrea and felt "she was in crisis," according to his statement to the Sheriff's Office. He was already on his way to her apartment when she called him from her balcony.

The investigation would show that Churna a week earlier had been prescribed a stimulant similar to Adderall and possibly had ingested a month's supply in just a few days. Friends who had spoken with her said she apparently hadn't slept for days because she was worried about being kidnapped.

### **Called police**

At 9:24 p.m. on Sept. 20, 2020, a dispatcher at the NORCOM 911 center took a call from a woman at Modera who said that "someone was trying to kill her in her apartment" and then hung up without giving an apartment number or details. Attempts by the dispatcher to call the number back failed, and a trio of officers from Redmond responded to the call.

Officers Brian Hood, Ty Tomlinson and Evan Barnard arrived just before 9:30 p.m., and a resident let them inside the building and used his key fob to give them access to the courtyard and elevator.

The trio of officers entered the courtyard and immediately saw a woman "scaling the outside rails of a balcony" on the fourth floor, according to Hood. She identified herself as "Andrea," saying she had called police and was outside because she didn't feel safe in her apartment.

Barnard and Tomlinson took to the stairs to the fourth floor while Hood remained in the courtyard talking to Churna.

"I asked her if someone else was inside, and she said, 'No, but I shot at someone,' " Hood wrote in a report. He immediately notified Tomlinson and Barnard, who were making their way upstairs. "I also advised she may be having mental health issues," Hood said.

Hood asked Churna if she had access to a firearm. She responded "yeah" and, over the officer's objections, ran back into the apartment. She returned to the balcony a moment later holding a black handgun.

Hood's report states that she "leaned her arm over the rail and pointed the gun directly at me." The officer said he feared for his life, but that the distance was too great for him to shoot at her, so he sought cover behind a wall. Churna did not fire.

Hood radioed to dispatch and said the woman was armed.

A neighbor on the third floor directly across the courtyard from Churna's apartment, Joshi Pranav, later told King County sheriff's detectives that he witnessed the exchange.

"The officer asked if she had shot and she said [she] thought she shot at someone in the apartment," Pranav said. When she came back out, Pranav was adamant that the woman's actions "seemed consistent with 'showing' the officer she had a firearm," the report said.

Hood told Churna to put down the gun, which she did. It was found later on a table on the balcony. Evidence at the scene indicated that Churna had fired a single shot into the door of her apartment before officers arrived and that the gun had malfunctioned, according to reports.

Hood explained to Churna that there were other officers in the building and told her it was important that she keep her hands visible at all times.

Tomlinson and Barnard, meantime, converged on apartment 450, the first apartment on the west side of the long leg of an interior hallway shaped like a "T," with the top facing north.

Their account comes from unsigned and undated written statements given to sheriff's detectives by their attorney, Lisa Elliott, in March 2021, six months after the shooting. Tomlinson and Barnard refused to be interviewed by sheriff's investigators.

Hood radioed to dispatch and the other officers that Churna had returned inside her apartment. Tomlinson, in his written statement, said he heard the front door open and a woman walk into the hallway with a gun in her hand. He said he retreated down the east hallway of the “T” intersection “when I saw her come into the hallway opening with the gun pointed directly at me.”

Tomlinson opened fire with his 9-mm Glock service handgun, firing six shots at Churna. Barnard, meantime, had run down the west hallway and believed he had come under fire as Tomlinson’s rounds impacted. He fired twice toward the intersection.

Churna, uninjured, retreated back to the apartment.

Four of the rounds, apparently fired by Tomlinson, punched through a hallway wall, lodging in a closet and living room wall of an empty apartment. Another round hit a door of an occupied apartment, according to investigative reports. Evidence at the scene showed multiple bullet strikes, ricochets, shell cases and bullet fragments up and down the hallway.

The “shots fired” announcement sent at least six other Redmond officers and police from Kirkland roaring to the apartment complex.

Several were armed with M4 assault-style rifles and two carried “ballistic shields” designed to stop a small-arms bullet. Officer Mendoza, who had completed his field training just five months earlier, raced upstairs and took up a position at the intersection of the “T,” armed with a .223-caliber rifle loaded with a 30-round magazine.

Churna, meantime, returned to the balcony, now on a cellphone talking to her ex-husband, Tim, who was just arriving at the apartment complex.

Hood, still below in the courtyard, asked whether she had fired at the officers or if she was hurt.

“No, they shot at me,” she said. Hood said he “pleaded” with her to stay on the balcony, but again she went inside. In his report, Hood noted in his report that when she returned to the balcony, she was unarmed and holding a cellphone. He broadcast over the radio that she told him the gun was inside.

In the hallway, at least five officers crowded at the intersection and were coming up with an arrest plan. Only one officer had a less-lethal option — Mendoza, who in addition to the rifle, also had a Taser.

Churna, who was 5-feet-3 and weighed 150 pounds, walked out of the apartment with her hands up. Officers ordered her to lie face down, head facing the other direction, and cross her ankles. She complied.

Several officers, using profanity, told her if she moved she would be “shot multiple times.” At least five officers were crowded at the top of the “T,” none more than 10 yards from where Churna lay waiting to be arrested.

“While waiting for additional officers and a shield to move up to the female, the female started to turn her head towards us and asked, ‘is my ex-husband here?’ ” Barnard wrote in his statement. He said she inched around nearly 90 degrees and was reaching for the door handle when Mendoza opened fire.

Barnard and at least one other officer wrote that they feared Churna was trying to retrieve the gun.

Computer-assisted dispatch logs, time-stamped dispatch tapes and written officer statements indicated Churna was on the floor in the hallway for more than three minutes before shots were fired.

Churna was struck six times. An autopsy showed that four of the rounds tore through her left arm and shoulder and through her torso, resulting in “catastrophic” injuries to her arm, lungs, liver, heart, breast and spine. Officers handcuffed her and attempted first aid, but she died within minutes. The medical examiner said three of the six wounds were fatal.

One of the officers at the scene, a trainee who had been on the streets for just a few weeks, was so distraught and upset after trying to help her that his training officer took his firearms as a precaution.

### **Memorial balloon**

Redmond police told the family and public that Churna “had confronted officers with a gun and was shot.”

Thomas, Churna’s father, 30 years as a cop, initially believed this account and expressed concern for the officers, knowing how traumatic shooting someone can be. After obtaining a copy of the sheriff’s investigation, he doesn’t feel that way anymore.

“Where was the de-escalation?” he asked. “They stood there and yelled obscenities at her and threatened her for nearly five minutes and then shot her. Why couldn’t they just walk down and put the cuffs on? They knew she didn’t have a gun.”

Last Wednesday, on what would be his ex-wife’s 41st birthday, Timothy Churna and his son planned to launch a memorial balloon in her memory. Tim Churna said the boy, now 8, knows his mother’s death had something to do with her mental health, but he doesn’t know that police were involved.

The boy idolizes his ex-police detective grandfather, Michael, and nobody has quite figured out how to tell him what happened yet.

Michael Thomas broke down when the topic came up. “She was a holiday baby,” he said of his only daughter. His voice cracked and there were tears on his cheeks. “We brought her home in a Christmas stocking.” And he wept.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 German intelligence eyes Covid protesters</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2021/12/27/german-intelligence-plans-closer-scrutiny-of-covid-protesters/">https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2021/12/27/german-intelligence-plans-closer-scrutiny-of-covid-protesters/</a>
GIST	<p>A German intelligence agency wants to increase its monitoring of anti-lockdown protesters who are regarded as potential drivers of radicalisation.</p> <p>Security services in northern Germany say protests linked to Covid-19 are opening the door for extremists with much broader grievances than merely opposing public health measures.</p> <p>The agency is the latest to voice concern over an eclectic protest movement which includes conspiracy theorists, far-right activists and members of <a href="#">the nationalist Alternative for Germany</a> (AfD) party.</p> <p>While generally peaceful, the protests <a href="#">have attracted concern</a> because of their links to extremists, cases of anti-Semitic messaging, and ill-judged comparisons between coronavirus policies and the actions of the Nazi regime.</p> <p>“These demonstrations definitely offer points of contact and there’s always the danger of radicalisation leading all the way to militancy,” said Torsten Voss, head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in the state of Hamburg.</p> <p>Shedding more light on the extremist protest scene “will be an important focal point of our work”, he told German media as he made the case for closer scrutiny.</p> <p>Politicians have raised concerns over anti-vaccine holdouts as the country races to protect more people against the fast-spreading Omicron variant — which prompted <a href="#">a new set of restrictions for New Year's celebrations</a>.</p>

<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	<p>During the last weekend before Christmas, about 11,000 people protested in Hamburg against a vaccine mandate favoured by Chancellor Olaf Scholz. There were similar demonstrations in other cities.</p> <p>Despite the protests, Mr Scholz's government celebrated a success on Sunday when it reached a target of 30 million vaccines administered in December, most of them booster shots.</p> <p>"We have reached an important milestone," said Health Minister Karl Lauterbach.</p> <p>One survey suggested that about half of unvaccinated people voted for the AfD <a href="#">in September's general election</a>, after party leaders fostered doubts about the vaccines. The AfD regards domestic intelligence services as politically motivated.</p> <p>Another group linked to the protests calls itself Citizens of the Reich, a term referring to pre-1945 Germany that implies rejection of the modern German state.</p> <p>Authorities in Hamburg said this movement had about 250 members in the city, a sharp rise since before the pandemic.</p> <p>In a Christmas message, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier praised a "silent majority" who obeyed restrictions but warned against divisions caused by the pandemic.</p> <p>"In a democracy, we don't all have to agree. But let us please remember that we are one country," he said. "We must be able to look each other in the eye even after the pandemic. And we want to live together even after the pandemic."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Iran nuclear deal: 8<sup>th</sup> round of talks begins</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/27/iran-nuclear-deal-eighth-round-of-talks-begins-in-vienna">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/27/iran-nuclear-deal-eighth-round-of-talks-begins-in-vienna</a>
GIST	<p>An eighth round of talks on reviving the <a href="#">Iran nuclear deal</a> has begun in Vienna, with Iran saying participants have been largely working from an acceptable common draft text and that its team was willing to stay as long as it takes to reach an agreement.</p> <p>The Iranian foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, said he wanted the focus of the coming round of talks to be on how Tehran could verify US sanctions had genuinely been lifted. The landmark 2015 deal, from which Donald Trump withdrew the US, had lifted sanctions on <a href="#">Iran</a> in return for controls on its civilian nuclear programme.</p> <p>"We must reach a point where Iranian oil can be sold easily and without any restrictions so money for that oil can be transferred in foreign currency to Iran's bank accounts," Amir-Abdollahian said.</p> <p>He said the negotiators were working from two joint draft texts. The first broadly covers the nature of all the sanctions related to the nuclear deal that the US must lift and the second is on the staging and details of the steps Iran must reverse to come back into compliance with the deal, such as reducing its nuclear stockpile and ending the use of advanced centrifuges.</p> <p>In terms of the third paper on the verification of the lifting of sanctions, Iran has spoken in terms of a fixed volume of oil and industrial exports that must be completed before it need take reciprocal action by returning fully to its compliance with its side of the deal.</p> <p>Iran is concerned western companies will be reluctant to invest in Iran because of fears that a future Republican US president could reimpose sanctions in 2025, putting their investments in jeopardy, as happened in 2018 when Trump pulled out of the deal.</p> <p>Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said in a speech in February that sanctions had to be lifted in practice, not just on paper. Research from the Iranian parliament set out the number of barrels of oil to</p>



be exported a day and the required value of transactions taking place in Iranian controlled banks in Europe.

Although the talks will be difficult, Iran seemed intent on injecting some optimism into a process that began in April.

In an important announcement the day before the eighth round, Iran's atomic energy authority gave a public pledge that it would not seek to enrich uranium above 60%, a promise that came as a relief to Russian negotiators concerned that if Tehran pushed ahead to nuclear weapons-grade 90% enrichment, the European and US delegations would abandon the talks.

Western diplomats have said they will not allow the talks to drag on much longer, possibly with early February as the final deadline. They point out the talks first started and were then paused for three months while a new Iranian government reviewed its negotiating position. Israel meanwhile claims Iran is procrastinating while its scientists take Iran secretly closer to a nuclear bomb. Western diplomats accept Iran is closer to breakout time than ever before, but this is not the same as being close to possessing a nuclear weapon.

Iran, China, Russia, France, Germany, the UK and the EU attended the talks, with a US delegation indirectly involved – a cumbersome procedure upon which Tehran has insisted even though it has delayed progress. Iran has complained in recent weeks that the European countries, especially France, have taken a position that is indistinguishable from the US.

The degree to which Iran needs western sanctions to be lifted to be able to produce a viable budget is contested within the country. The leadership team around the new president, Ebrahim Raisi, claims it can avoid lifting costly subsidies on petrol and still produce a viable budget, a claim rejected by many Iranian economists.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 India blocks Mother Teresa charity funding</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/dec/28/india-bans-mother-teresa-charity-from-receiving-funds-from-abroad">https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/dec/28/india-bans-mother-teresa-charity-from-receiving-funds-from-abroad</a>
GIST	<p>The Indian government has blocked Mother Teresa's charity from receiving funds from abroad, just days after it faced a police investigation for "hurting religious sentiments of Hindus" amid rising intolerance towards Christians in India.</p> <p>The Missionaries of Charity, which was started by Mother Teresa in 1950 and runs a network of shelters across <a href="#">India</a> led by nuns to help the poor, was denied the licence to continue to receive funds from abroad, cutting the charity off from vital resources.</p> <p>The home ministry, which made the decision on Christmas Day, said it had come across "adverse inputs" when considering the application.</p> <p>The rejection of the application comes less than two weeks after Hindu hardliners accused the charity of carrying out forced conversions of Hindus to <a href="#">Christianity</a> in a home for girls it runs in Vadodara in the state of Gujarat.</p> <p>The accusations, which the charity fiercely denies, were that the charity was "luring" poor young Hindu women into becoming Christian by forcing them to read Christian texts and take part in Christian prayer.</p> <p>"The institution has been involved in activities to hurt the religious sentiments of Hindus intentionally and with bitterness," a report filed to the police alleged.</p>

“The girls inside the Home for Girls are being lured to adopt Christianity by making them wear the cross around their neck and also placing the Bible on the table of the storeroom used by the girls, in order to compel them to read the Bible ... It is an attempted crime to force religious conversion upon the girls.”

A spokesperson for the Missionaries of Charity rejected all the allegations as unfounded. “We have not converted anyone or forced anyone to marry into Christian faith,” he said.

The accusation come amid a [wave of anti-Christian intolerance and violence](#) that has been spreading across India, with rightwing Hindu nationalist groups accusing Christians of forcing Hindus to convert against their will, or through bribes.

Christian pastors have been attacked and church services violently disrupted in recent months as anti-Christian hysteria has grown, and over Christmas there was an unprecedented spate of attacks against the Christian community, including the vandalising of a statue of Jesus Christ.

The refusal by the government, which is ruled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), to grant a new licence to Mother Teresa’s charity has been seen by many as indicative of a growing hostility towards Christian organisations operating in India.

In recent years, the BJP government, led by the prime minister, Narendra Modi, has put a tight rein on NGOs receiving foreign funding, particularly those that have been critical of the government, and both Greenpeace and Amnesty International are among those who have had their accounts frozen by the government.

In a statement on Monday, the Missionaries of Charity confirmed that its renewal application had been denied, and that it would not operate any foreign funding accounts “until the matter is resolved”.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Cost of food items going up 5% in 2022</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/these-food-items-are-getting-more-costly-in-2022-11640601008?mod=hp_lead_pos5">https://www.wsj.com/articles/these-food-items-are-getting-more-costly-in-2022-11640601008?mod=hp_lead_pos5</a>
GIST	<p>Everything from coffee to mustard is getting more expensive next year.</p> <p>Many food manufacturers say they plan to raise prices in 2022 for a range of products from macaroni-and-cheese to snacks, the latest sign that consumers will continue to face higher costs at the supermarket.</p> <p>“There’s nothing immune from price increases,” said Tony Sarsam, chief executive officer of food retailer and distributor <a href="#">SpartanNash</a> Co., adding that produce, dairy and packaged food such as bread and juice are among many items set to become more pricey next year.</p> <p>Food prices are estimated to rise 5% in the first half of 2022, according to research firm IRI, though the level of increases will vary by grocers and regions.</p> <p><a href="#">Mondelez International</a> Inc. said recently that <a href="#">it was raising prices</a> across cookies, candy and other products sold in the U.S. by 6% to 7% starting in January. <a href="#">General Mills</a> Inc. and <a href="#">Campbell Soup</a> Co. said their price <a href="#">increases also would take effect in January</a>. <a href="#">Kraft Heinz</a> Co. told retailer customers that it would raise prices across many of its products including Jell-O pudding and Grey Poupon mustard, with some items going up as much as 20%, according to a memo viewed by The Wall Street Journal.</p> <p>The increases follow others that food manufacturers imposed in 2021, and are part of what businesses and economists call the highest inflation in decades. Higher wage, material and freight costs are <a href="#">prompting industries from manufacturing to retail to raise prices of goods</a>, creating an environment in which some executives say they have room to charge more.</p>

Kraft Heinz said the average price increase on its products will be 5%, adding that it wasn't passing all of its cost increases to customers. Production costs of Grey Poupon rose 22%, and the company is raising it by 6% to 13% for customers, the company said.

Mondelez, General Mills and Campbell had no additional comment.

The Labor Department said the consumer-price index rose 6.8% in November from a year ago, [the fastest pace since 1982](#). The food-at-home index, which includes purchase from grocery stores, rose 6.4% over the past 12 months, with meats, poultry, fish and eggs increasing 12.8%.

Coming price increases in 2022 range from as low as 2% to 20%, hitting all sections of the grocery store including produce and packaged goods. Potatoes, celery and other heavier vegetables will have higher price tags next year in part because of higher freight costs, supermarket executives said. Wine, beer and liquor are also likely to get more expensive, they said, especially those that are imported.

Pantry staples such as mayonnaise and frozen meals are expected to be more pricey partly because of higher labor, logistics and packaging costs, some executives said.

Consumers remain willing to spend on groceries even as prices rise, some companies say, though that is starting to change. As shoppers become more price-sensitive, they are [buying cheaper versions of meat](#) and cooking oil, among others, industry executives said. Supermarkets say they are taking [various approaches to combat price increases](#) as consumers react to prices, including discontinuing certain items.

Grand Rapids, Mich.-based SpartanNash is holding down prices of frequently-bought products such as milk, eggs and frozen waffles, Mr. Sarsam said. Consumers pay more attention to what they pay for such items. To offset what it loses on such staples, he said, the chain of Martin's Super Markets and Family Fare stores is charging more for baked or prepared food such as stuffed chicken breasts. Consumers so far are showing that they are willing to pay more for some food that can save them time.

The fast pace and wide range of increases are becoming harder for supermarket operators to navigate. Reynolds Cramer, chief executive officer of Fareway Stores Inc., said: "We received a letter from a vendor announcing price increases next month. We haven't put into effect price increases they've given us this month."

Stuart Aitken, chief merchant and marketing officer for [Kroger Co.](#), said the grocer was pushing back on some suppliers, delaying when price increases take effect and challenging manufacturers on the rate of increases to ensure that proposed price hikes are accurate. "Taking price increases is never a good outcome," Mr. Aitken said.

Other grocers are [stockpiling goods](#) before prices climb again, with some securing truckloads of items at a big discount shortly before their expiration date.

Grocery delivery company Fresh Direct LLC is expecting 2% to 4% cost increases in 2022 and plans to pass on increases for items that are more niche or less popular among its customers and is monitoring competitors' prices weekly, said Scott Crawford, its chief merchandising officer.

"I'm hoping it's transitory, but once the bar gets set it will move up," Mr. Crawford said.

Susie Scott, a retiree who lives in Collierville, Tenn., said she had noticed her grocery bill go up in recent months. Bacon and milk are among items getting more expensive, Ms. Scott said, adding that she has been paying more attention to prices while grocery shopping. She has been buying chicken and ground chuck on sale every Tuesday at her nearby supermarket, but even they are getting pricey.

"I'm spending more at the grocery store, and it's not necessarily that I'm buying more," Ms. Scott said.

HEADLINE	12/27 Omicron expected to dent global economy
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-variant-is-expected-to-dent-global-economy-in-early-2022-11640631554?mod=hp_lead_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-variant-is-expected-to-dent-global-economy-in-early-2022-11640631554?mod=hp_lead_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>A winter surge in Covid-19 cases driven by the Omicron variant is prompting economists to downgrade U.S. and global growth expectations in the early part of 2022 as businesses struggle with absenteeism and consumers stay home to avoid getting sick.</p> <p>Several economists have recently cut forecasts for the U.S. following early signs that a sharp rise in cases <a href="#">has already disrupted parts of the economy</a>. Airlines <a href="#">canceled thousands of flights</a> over the Christmas holiday weekend and into Monday, in part due to Covid-19-driven staff shortages.</p> <p>The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reduced on Monday the amount of recommended time that infected people who are asymptomatic should isolate to five days from 10 as more research is done and thinking evolves on how best to manage the pandemic.</p> <p>In Europe, leaders reviewed whether to put in place new limits on activity as New Year celebrations approach. The U.K. government decided against tightened restrictions after reviewing hospitalization data, but Health Minister Sajid Javid said people should celebrate New Year's Eve outside if possible.</p> <p>U.S. officials are seeking ways <a href="#">to ease pressure on hospitals</a> while also limiting business disruptions.</p> <p>Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, downgraded his first-quarter U.S. gross domestic product forecast to 2.2% growth from 5.2% as he "can see the economic damage mounting going into the first quarter."</p> <p>Mr. Zandi pointed to softer spending on travel and <a href="#">cancellations of sporting events</a> and <a href="#">Broadway shows</a> due to the disruptive Covid-19 outbreak.</p> <p>"It feels like a very similar dynamic as when Delta hit," Mr. Zandi said, referring to the Delta variant of Covid-19 that gripped the U.S. in the summer. He initially expected economic growth of 6.1% headed into the third quarter; in the end the economy expanded at a 2.3% pace from July to September.</p> <p>The economy is estimated to have grown at an annual pace of 7.6% in the current fourth quarter, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta's GDP forecasting tool.</p> <p>Economists have struggled to predict the impact of Covid-19 on economies throughout the pandemic, including in the U.S., where changes in the labor market <a href="#">have surprised both the government and forecasters</a>. Still, they expect Omicron will push economic activity from the first quarter into the second, with a smaller impact than from prior waves of the pandemic. The Federal Reserve earlier this month forecast that the U.S. economy would grow by 4% next year.</p> <p>"Broadly speaking, each new wave is going to do a little less damage than previous waves," said Mr. Zandi, adding that healthcare providers have gotten better at treating the virus and businesses are getting better at adjusting.</p> <p>Credit- and debit-card data from JPMorgan Chase indicate that spending in services-related categories such as airlines and restaurants remained depressed last week. Now, the surging Omicron variant is "going to change people's behavior at the margin" and crimp demand for the spending on services that makes up a large slice of economic growth as people stay home, said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics.</p> <p>Many food manufacturers, meanwhile, are planning price increases again in 2022, as inflation reaches levels not seen in decades.</p>

Pantheon Macroeconomics recently cut its forecast for U.S. growth to 3% annualized in the first quarter of 2022 from 5%. Other economists are voicing concerns about downside risks to their existing projections.

“It’s unfortunate [the Omicron variant] had to break out during the holiday season, even in places like New York City, where people are highly vaccinated,” said Pooja Sriram, U.S. economist at Barclays. She hasn’t lowered her forecast for growth in the first quarter but said she is keeping a close eye on the outbreak.

While the U.S. isn’t imposing shutdowns, “we see some kind of voluntary social distancing if people start canceling travel plans and become hesitant about using accommodation, that will have an effect on growth and employment,” Ms. Sriram said.

The Biden administration’s top medical adviser, Anthony Fauci, in an interview with MSNBC on Monday, urged U.S. officials to consider requiring a Covid-19 vaccine for domestic air travel.

For Natalia Arbelaez, the rise of Omicron was the final straw of the pandemic for her playground business. Over seven years, Ms. Arbelaez built up Busy Bees, a popular chain of three indoor playgrounds in the Washington, D.C., suburbs catering to children. Despite raising wages to \$15 an hour earlier this year, she said she has struggled to find enough workers, forcing her to close one location in June.

Now, the new variant has led customers to cancel birthday-party reservations, making it impossible to keep the other two locations open, she said. Busy Bees will close permanently on Jan. 1.

“I fought hard since March 2020 and here we are, almost January 2022,” she said. “Even though I am very sad I feel lighter. I was carrying a lot of weight on my shoulders.”

Earlier this month, the chief economist of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development warned that should the Omicron variant sidestep existing vaccines, the world economy could face a sharper slowdown than previously expected.

In the U.K., record infections ahead of Christmas put pressure on Prime Minister Boris Johnson to bring in more stringent measures to ease pressure on hospitals. But Mr. Johnson, who faces resistance to tighter restrictions from within his party, said there wasn’t enough information about the new variant to justify imposing them before Christmas. Current government guidance in England is for people to work from home and avoid unnecessary social contacts. In Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, limits have been placed on social gatherings and mass events as Omicron spreads.

Still, the new variant pushed many Britons to stay home over the festive period, prompting businesses to seek economic aid. Last week, the U.K. Treasury offered grants of up to £6,000, equivalent to about \$8,065, to businesses in the hospitality sector.

Recent spending data suggest the rise of the Omicron variant could be causing people to curtail spending outside the home. Restaurant visits in December have slipped as more people stayed home. For the week ended Dec. 26, the number of seated diners in U.S. restaurants was down 27% from 2019 levels, the widest gap since April, according to data from OpenTable.

In-store spending at retailers and restaurants also fell in late November and early December. For the week ended Nov. 30, spending was down 5.3% from the previous week. For the week ended Dec. 7, it was down 5.6% before rising 3.4% in the week ended Dec. 14, according to payment-card spending data tabulated by the Commerce Department.

The Omicron outbreak is sending employees home sick amid a staffing crunch that has led employers to cling to workers. Filings for unemployment benefits hovered at the lowest level in more than half a century the week ended Dec. 18.

	<p>Still, consumer demand for gifts remained healthy in the run-up to the holiday season. Americans spent at a brisk pace over the shopping season, amid an early rush to stores due to worries about Covid-related supply and delivery problems.</p> <p>U.S. retail sales rose 8.5% between Nov. 1 and Christmas Eve compared with the same period last year, according to Mastercard SpendingPulse, which tracks sales in the Mastercard payments network coupled with survey-based estimates for cash and checks.</p> <p>For now, economists expect the highly contagious Omicron variant to cause a short-term soft patch for U.S. spending and broader economic growth. It comes as central banks across the globe tee up expected interest-rate rises next year in an effort to tame inflation. The Federal Reserve has set the stage for a series of increases beginning in the spring.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Natural-gas prices rise: weather forecasts</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/natural-gas-prices-rise-on-colder-weather-forecasts-11640634085?mod=hp_list_pos3">https://www.wsj.com/articles/natural-gas-prices-rise-on-colder-weather-forecasts-11640634085?mod=hp_list_pos3</a>
GIST	<p>Natural-gas prices rose Monday after weather forecasts showed a bout of cold temperatures that could spur heating demand for parts of the U.S. this week.</p> <p>U.S. natural-gas futures finished Monday's session at \$4.060 per million British thermal units. That is up 8.8% from \$3.731 per million BTUs at Friday's close and the largest dollar gain since Nov. 26.</p> <p>The Weather Prediction Center <a href="#">predicted heavy snow, freezing temperatures</a> and strong winds in the northern and western parts of the country.</p> <p>"The colder weather coming to the U.S. will be watched and we should see a substantial pick up in heating demand next week," wrote <a href="#">BOK Financial</a> analysts in a note.</p> <p>As the weather turns colder this week, Refinitiv is projecting average U.S. gas demand, including exports, to jump to 126.7 billion cubic feet a day, up from 110 billion.</p> <p>Most investors have been betting on a decline in gas prices. The number of bets by hedge funds and other speculators that prices will decline continue to outnumber those on rising prices by a wide margin, according to recent Commodity Futures Trading Commission data.</p> <p>Monday's rise marks a break from the <a href="#">monthslong decline</a> in natural-gas prices. An uptick in domestic gas production and an unseasonably warm fall and winter delayed heating season in much of the country, causing prices to come down.</p> <p>Natural-gas prices extended declines last week after the U.S. Energy Information Administration storage report showed a weekly decline of 55 billion cubic feet. That fell short of the 57 billion forecast from analysts surveyed by The Wall Street Journal, helping push gas storage into a small surplus.</p> <p>Prices skyrocketed earlier in the year, however, surpassing \$6 per MMBtu in October.</p> <p>It isn't unusual for natural-gas prices to bounce around a lot this time of year, when traders must triangulate winter weather forecasts with production reports and inventory data. Much of the world is on watch <a href="#">for heating-fuel shortages</a> this winter after a lot of gas was burned for air-conditioning during some of the hottest summer weather ever recorded in the Northern Hemisphere.</p> <p>Other factors have put pressure on gas prices. A lack of coal supplies has caused generators to conserve coal stockpiles and boost natural-gas-fired generation, said Bank of America analysts in a recent note.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/27 SPD monitor: consent decree closure path
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3293530/a-decade-in-the-making-spd-monitor-charts-path-to-consent-decree-closure/">https://mynorthwest.com/3293530/a-decade-in-the-making-spd-monitor-charts-path-to-consent-decree-closure/</a>
GIST	<p>Reformation of the Seattle Police Department exists within the context of the Department of Justice's Consent Decree, which dates back to 2012 and has been in limbo since Seattle's eruption into protest in the summer of 2020 over the murder of George Floyd.</p> <p>The no man's land that is the consent decree could come to a close in early 2022 when the court appointed police monitor submits their final review of SPD's compliance under the decree.</p> <p>In a <a href="#">memo</a> filed Dec. 23 to U.S. District Judge James Robart, monitor Dr. Antonio Oftelie outlined the parameters of compliance for next year and summarized significant actions regarding police reform in 2021.</p> <p>Most notably, Oftelie indicated that the police monitor rejected a request from SPD for "technical assistance" in early November of this year regarding the implementation of attempted city council police reform this past summer that <a href="#">outlawed the use of less-lethal weapons</a>.</p> <p>The memo implies that the council's legislation is largely superfluous to the use of force policies that were adopted earlier in 2021, stating "in approving SPD's Crowd Management and Use of Force policies earlier this year, the Monitoring Team agreed that the interim policy revisions – many of which reflected lessons learned over the course of 2020 and as informed through discussion with national and international experts – were current and consistent with best practices."</p> <p>It also hints that the police monitor, as well as SPD, were not adequately consulted when the council drafted <a href="#">Council Bill 120105</a>. The memo highlights the importance of "iteration" and "discussion" when "memorializing terms," processes which are not possible now that the ordinance exists as law.</p> <p>"In this case, where fixed terms have been legislatively prescribed, the Monitoring Team sees little avenue to provide technical assistance in a manner that would not require changes to the terms of the Ordinance itself," Oftelie's memo reads.</p> <p>The council's bill, which passed in August 2021, bans the use of "disorientation devices," such as blast balls or ultrasonic cannons, in most circumstances.</p> <p>The bill is technically law, although Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan declined to sign the ordinance, claiming in a letter to the council that "this ordinance undermines reform efforts and constitutional policing as it conflicts with the process for policy changes as required under the Consent Decree."</p> <p>The bill required the Seattle Police Department to redraft its use of force policies within 60 days of the bill's passage on Aug. 16. SPD has not yet done so, with the police monitor indicating that they sought assistance from the DOJ to draft such policies on Nov. 2.</p> <p>Another notable component of the consent decree update is the explicit mention of SPD's use of force in protests and demonstrations in 2020, in which DOJ will "make findings regarding compliance with the consent decree, requirements related to use of force, use of force reporting, investigation and review, and constitutional policing generally."</p> <p>Earlier in December, an SPD officer was suspended for a week without pay for rolling a bicycle's tires over a protester's head in the wake of the non-conviction of the officers involved in the killing of Breonna Taylor.</p> <p>The memo mentions "designing a process to ensure that the City uses all appropriate mechanism to engage all of Seattle's many communities in a substantive process that achieves lawful and equitable policy and practices" forthcoming in 2022. It looks toward the Office of Police Accountability's <a href="#">Sentinel Event</a></p>

[Review](#) process as providing SPD “specific, actionable recommendations ... that it might [use to] improve its approach to managing crowds and using force within crowd contexts.”

The report summarizes three “Community Engagement Sessions” in early 2022 used as framework before the police monitor submits its final compliance status report, originally scheduled for March 1, 2022, but will likely be submitted at March’s end to accommodate the scheduling of the engagement sessions.

#### 1. Crisis Intervention: Jan. 11, 2022

The Monitoring Team will report on SPD’s capacity to respond to a person in crisis as well as statistics related to SPD’s crisis intervention response, including the frequency of crisis response and the outcomes of these events. The Team will also discuss data and trends related to officer training, the frequency of use of force in crisis situations, and misconduct allegations related to crisis intervention.

#### 2. Stops and Detentions: Feb. 8, 2022

The assessment of stops and detentions will include statistical analysis of SPD stop trends overall, and broken out by demographics, over time. The Community Engagement Session will summarize statistics regarding the frequency of frisks and how often frisks result in the discovery of weapons. It will consider how the Department is assessing its own stop practices, and how supervisors are overseeing such practices, to assess SPD’s compliance with Constitutional requirements pertaining to stops and frisks.

#### 3. Use of Force: March 8, 2022

The Monitoring Team will update the public on statistics related to SPD’s use of force practices, both overall and specifically related to protests in 2020. It will discuss SPD’s use of force review and investigation systems and statistics on misconduct allegations related to use of force. The Monitoring Team also anticipates providing an overview of how the City and SPD have responded to issues with SPD’s handling of protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Hospitals brace: surge in Covid patients</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/27/covid-hospitals-surge-in-patients/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/27/covid-hospitals-surge-in-patients/</a>
GIST	<p>U.S. hospitals continue to reel from surging volumes of <a href="#">coronavirus</a> patients as the omicron variant drives a record-breaking flurry of infections in some regions — with medical workers bracing for more misery in the weeks ahead.</p> <p>The New York City health department reported that the seven-day average of confirmed and probable coronavirus cases there has climbed to 17,334 a day, the highest recorded levels of the pandemic, and a roughly tenfold increase from a month ago.</p> <p>“The numbers look huge. But my guess is the true number is much, much higher,” said Craig Spencer, director of global health in emergency medicine at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center. “It’s definitely missing a lot of people who are testing positive on rapid tests” and failing to report their results.</p> <p>Louisiana officials reported that the state’s covid-19 hospitalizations have <a href="#">doubled</a> to about 450 patients since last week, with unvaccinated patients accounting for 80 percent of hospitalizations.</p> <p>In Florida, Miami’s Jackson Health System reported that as of Monday morning, 212 people were hospitalized with covid, up from 37 on Nov. 30.</p> <p>And in Texas, Houston Methodist reported Monday that fast-spreading omicron accounted for 94 percent of its sequenced coronavirus cases, with health system leaders describing unprecedented demand for tests. “With test volumes, we’re still setting records,” said S. Wesley Long, the medical director of diagnostic microbiology at Houston Methodist. “We didn’t see a decrease in testing over the weekend and over Christmas, which is pretty unusual.”</p>

Meanwhile, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday [halved the recommended isolation period](#) for infected people with no symptoms, from 10 to five days, as officials moved to reduce disruptions from the omicron wave. The change was “motivated by science demonstrating that the majority of SARS-CoV-2 transmission occurs early in the course of illness,” the CDC said in a statement.

The variant continued to take its toll on the nation’s air carriers and passengers Monday, when airlines canceled more than 1,000 flights amid a surge in cases among crew members. While many of the cancellations were attributed to weather, the jump in virus cases continued to be a major culprit.

In a call with about two dozen governors, President Biden said that the federal government was working to ramp up supplies of tests, protective equipment and other material — but that key responsibilities for combating the omicron surge fell to local leaders.

“Look, there is no federal solution. This gets solved at the state level,” Biden told the governors Monday after a request from Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson (R) that the federal government not “stand in the way of state solutions” on treatments and tests.

“We’re going to have your back in any way we can,” Biden said.

Health-care workers responding to the increase in coronavirus cases say the new demands are further straining a health system already frayed from nearly two years of pandemic response.

“Over the past few weeks — really, since Thanksgiving — every day gets progressively worse,” said Megan Ranney, an emergency physician at Brown University in Rhode Island, who worked a hospital shift Monday. In an interview, Ranney detailed how staff shortages, delayed procedures and a steadily climbing volume of covid cases are challenging efforts to provide patient care.

“We’re all trying to come up with alternative systems to take care of our patients better,” she said, describing how health-care workers are increasingly trying to start lab testing and medications while patients wait for beds, hoping to speed up the response. “But it’s never enough, because the patients keep coming.”

David J. De La Zerda, intensive care unit medical director at Jackson Memorial Hospital, said the increase in patients at the Miami medical center has happened suddenly, and officials are bracing for difficult weeks ahead.

De La Zerda said, so far, fewer patients overall are being admitted to the ICU compared with previous waves of the pandemic, in large part because more people are vaccinated. But with case positivity rates soaring in Miami, De La Zerda said the hospital still expects to treat a crush of critically ill patients, most of whom will be unvaccinated.

“It may be happening slower than with the delta variant, when maybe we were getting five to six patients per day to the ICU, and now we are getting one to two in 24 hours,” De La Zerda said. “But I don’t see a difference except maybe the slower pace, and even that is now starting to change in the past week.”

According to hospital data, 35 of the 212 admitted covid patients are receiving critical care. Just 38 of the 212 admitted patients are vaccinated against covid, and 18 of those 38 vaccinated patients are earlier organ transplant recipients who typically take medication that suppresses their immune system to prevent rejection of donated organs.

Compared with the hospital’s four previous spikes in patient counts, De La Zerda said the health-care system faces an additional challenge this time because so many nurses and doctors are testing positive for the coronavirus, leading to staffing shortages.

“This is what we are seeing now that is different than before, and we are down a lot of nurses and physicians who cannot work for five to seven days,” De La Zerda said.

De La Zerda said health-care workers understand much better in this wave how to treat patients. “But the issue now is we don’t have enough personnel to do that,” he added.

In Miami-Dade County, 57,675 new covid cases total were reported during the past week, up from 12,594 cases in the prior week.

Although Miami-Dade hospitals are nowhere close to running out of hospital beds, 183 patients were admitted on Sunday alone, a sixfold increase over the number weeks ago.

Nearly two years into the pandemic, Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava (D) said the omicron variant is forcing leaders nationwide to confront the unsettling reality that covid may be here for the foreseeable future.

“This pandemic is now clearly a long-term phenomenon,” Levine Cava said. “Are we going to need to just continue living with it, and following these various safety precautions? ... Will there be more severe variants? We just don’t know.”

The fallout from omicron may be especially acute in January when schoolchildren return to the classroom after holiday break, Levine Cava said. The Miami-Dade mayor said she’s also steeling for more debate over masks, having pursued a sweeping mandate on face coverings that was blocked by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) and the state’s GOP-controlled legislature.

“We have conflicting information from the federal government, versus the state government, and how that gets resolved may depend on the courts,” Levine Cava said, warning that residents end up confused about what precautions to take.

Omicron infections appear generally to be mild in people who were previously vaccinated or boosted. Public health experts have warned of a rising number of hospitalizations among unvaccinated children. New York’s top public health official issued an alert Friday warning of the “striking increase” in children with coronavirus infections. Pediatric hospitalizations have roughly quadrupled in New York City this month.

“The risks of COVID-19 for children are real,” acting state health commissioner Mary T. Bassett said in a statement. “We must use all available safe and effective infection control, prevention and mitigation strategies.”

Anthony S. Fauci, chief medical adviser to Biden and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, predicted Monday that omicron cases would continue to spread rapidly across the United States, with the virus variant able to evade some of the protection of vaccines. Fauci also warned against large holiday gatherings, which he said could accelerate outbreaks.

“When you’re talking about a New Year’s Eve party where you have 30, 40, 50 people celebrating ... I would recommend strongly, stay away from that this year,” Fauci said on CNN. But he said he was optimistic the U.S. surge of infections would soon reverse.

“I hope it turns around as sharply as what we’ve seen in South Africa,” Fauci said, citing the steep decline of omicron cases there after an equally sharp surge of infections.

England, France and other nations have also reported record case numbers, but the global picture of omicron’s spread remains incomplete: The World Health Organization, CDC and other agencies held off on updating data for several days because of the holiday.

As omicron rapidly advances across the United States, public health experts and White House officials are closely looking at major metropolitan areas for clues about the outbreak’s spread and severity.

In New York City, the seven-day daily average of coronavirus hospitalizations has risen to 208, roughly quadruple the daily hospitalization rate from a month ago, health officials reported. The actual number of recent covid hospitalizations and deaths “will likely be higher” given reporting lags, the city health department cautioned.

Physicians also have warned that some people who experience only mild symptoms initially may end up requiring more intense care if their cases take a turn for the worse. Other covid patients with seemingly minor cases have grappled with long-lasting fatigue and other consequences.

Biden on Monday participated in a virtual call about the pandemic with 25 governors, on which he acknowledged the testing shortfall Americans are confronting amid the rapid spread of the omicron variant.

“Seeing how tough it was for some folks to get a test this weekend shows that we have more work to do, and we’re doing it,” Biden said in brief introductory remarks, the first time he had joined the White House’s standing call with the governors.

After ticking through steps his administration has taken to improve the situation, Biden said that in hindsight, more should have been done to ramp up testing capacity.

“It’s not enough. It’s clearly not enough. If I had, if we’d known, we would have gone harder, quicker if we could have,” Biden said.

During the portion of the call that was not aired publicly, Biden and administration officials fielded questions from governors that addressed issues such as keeping schools open and the latest findings on omicron, according to a White House release and attendees on the call. Attendees also said Biden officials and governors agreed to focus on hospitalizations as a key metric to track the omicron wave, rather than skyrocketing cases.

“It’s promising that, in President Biden’s first COVID call with Governors since he took office, the President and Dr. Fauci finally agreed that we should measure COVID response by hospitalization rates — not case counts,” Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts (R) said in a written statement. “This has been our strategy in Nebraska since the beginning of the pandemic.”

In response, the White House pointed to Biden’s speech from last week, in which he emphasized that while positive cases will hit even vaccinated people, they are broadly protected from hospitalization because vaccinations can defang the virus’s worst consequences.

Omicron’s continued march was felt in the travel industry, with airlines canceling more flights as staff members reported testing positive. Still, domestic carriers appeared to be making progress as disruptions fell compared with days earlier. Delta Air Lines said it expected to cancel more than 200 of its scheduled 4,166 flights Monday, down nearly half from a day earlier. United Airlines said it was canceling 115 flights Monday because of staffing issues related to the virus.

“Unfortunately, Omicron decided to play Scrooge and affected airlines at a terrible time,” said Henry Harteveltdt, an airline analyst.

Major airlines asked the CDC last week to shorten the time crew members who test positive must spend in isolation, a move that airline unions oppose.

Despite the recent challenges to air travel, there was little indication that travelers were delaying their trips. The Transportation Security Administration said it screened more than 2 million people Sunday, approaching 2019 levels.

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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/us/where-vaccination-rates-are-low-in-the-us-the-reasons-vary.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/us/where-vaccination-rates-are-low-in-the-us-the-reasons-vary.html</a>
GIST	<p>In the United States, over 204 million people are fully vaccinated, but that's still only 62 percent of the population, much lower than in most other wealthy countries.</p> <p>At the county level, vaccination rates range <a href="#">from about 83 percent in places like Montgomery County, Md.</a>, a populous area just outside Washington, D.C., to <a href="#">around 15 percent in rural places like McPherson County</a> in northern South Dakota.</p> <p>As the Omicron variant surges, and experts say that vaccinations strongly protect against severe illness, U.S. public health officials are closely examining ways to reach the least-vaccinated areas. But the roadblocks are not the same everywhere. Some clearly have to do with politics: Republican-leaning areas have generally been vaccine laggards. But pockets of the country can have their own quirks unrelated to partisanship.</p> <p>Here is a look at the challenges faced by three counties where, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data, vaccination rates are among the lowest in the nation. (State figures for those counties may vary from the C.D.C. data because of differences in methodology, reporting lags and other factors.)</p> <p><b>LaGrange County, Ind.</b></p> <p>Resistance to vaccines is not new in LaGrange County, a rural area along Indiana's border with Michigan. <a href="#">Just 22 percent of residents are fully vaccinated</a> against the coronavirus, and, according to Dr. Tony Pechin, the county health officer, only 15 percent of children in the county are up-to-date on standard vaccines by the age of 2.</p> <p>Dr. Pechin said that he had encountered the usual conspiracy theories about vaccines, and that even some longtime patients would not heed his advice to get the shots.</p> <p>But the most important factor, he said, is that about half the county's 40,000 residents are Amish, a group that overwhelmingly rejects the vaccines. Among non-Amish residents, he said, the vaccination rate is 45 to 48 percent.</p> <p>Dr. Pechin said that a pharmacy frequented by Amish residents was among the first in LaGrange County to receive doses but had vaccinated just eight people in six months.</p> <p>The state health commissioner sent a delegation to meet with Amish leaders in the spring, and the C.D.C. sent another over the summer.</p> <p>"When they were done," Dr. Pechin said of the envoys, "they called me and just said, 'Good luck, Tony.'"</p> <p><b>Cameron Parish, La.</b></p> <p>When <a href="#">Hurricane Laura</a> made landfall near Cameron Parish in August 2020, many residents left damaged homes behind and took refuge inland — and have yet to return.</p> <p>According to the C.D.C., <a href="#">the vaccination rate is just 17 percent</a>. But Louisiana health officials say that those figures do not take account of the population shift.</p> <p>"Although the numbers look awful, they're not as bad as they appear, because of an outflux of people due to the natural disasters," said Dr. Lacey Cavanaugh, a regional health officer for the Louisiana Department of Health.</p> <p>But if the statistics were calculated to reflect the current populations of Cameron Parish and others ravaged by recent storms, she said, they would probably still show vaccination rates below national averages.</p> <p>Laura destroyed much of the parish's limited health infrastructure, so for months, health officials administered vaccines in a tent in a hospital parking lot. And for residents consumed by the work of repairing homes and businesses, getting vaccinated fell low on the priority list.</p>



State health officials have worked to bring vaccines directly to disaster recovery events, and advised residents that getting sick with Covid-19 could make the road back even harder.

“Once you’re protected” from the virus, Dr. Cavanaugh said, “that’s one less thing for you to worry about.”

#### **Winston County, Ala.**

A rural county with a history of going its own way — it refused to join Alabama in seceding from the Union during the Civil War — faces many of the challenges that have hampered the state’s vaccine uptake.

Vaccine misinformation is still spreading on social media, said Dr. Karen Landers, a regional officer with the state’s Public Health Department, despite months of efforts with local leaders, faith-based organizations and pharmacies. [The county’s vaccination rate has stalled at around 21 percent](#), according to the C.D.C.

Persuading young people that they are vulnerable to the disease and need a vaccine can be a particularly acute problem, she said. But Dr. Landers said she remained determined: “We know that not everyone will listen to us, but that does not alleviate our responsibility.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Vaccine mandate for domestic air travel?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/27/fauci-us-should-consider-vaccine-mandate-for-us-ai/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/27/fauci-us-should-consider-vaccine-mandate-for-us-ai/</a>
GIST	<p>Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, said Monday the U.S. should consider a vaccination mandate for domestic air travel, signaling a potential embrace of an idea the <a href="#">Biden administration</a> has previously eschewed, as COVID-19 cases spike.</p> <p>Fauci, President Joe Biden’s chief science adviser on the pandemic response, said such a mandate might drive up the nation’s lagging vaccination rate as well as confer stronger protection on flights, for which federal regulations require all those aged 2 and older to wear a mask.</p> <p>“When you make vaccination a requirement, that’s another incentive to get more people vaccinated,” Fauci told MSNBC. “If you want to do that with domestic flights, I think that’s something that seriously should be considered.”</p> <p>The <a href="#">Biden administration</a> has thus far balked at imposing a vaccination requirement for domestic air travel. Two officials said Biden’s science advisers have yet to make a formal recommendation for such a requirement to the president.</p> <p>The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said a vaccine mandate on planes could trigger a host of logistical and legal concerns.</p> <p>The U.S. currently mandates that most foreign nationals traveling to the U.S. be fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, though citizens and permanent residents only need to show proof of a negative test taken within a day of boarding.</p> <p>Federal rules don’t require people traveling by air within the U.S. to show a negative test. Hawaii requires travelers to test or show proof of vaccination to avoid a mandatory quarantine.</p> <p>Biden did not respond to questions on whether he was considering implementing a domestic air travel vaccination requirement, but he told reporters that the subject was discussed on a call with the nation’s governors Monday morning.</p>

“They asked Dr. Fauci some more questions about everything from whether or not he thought he was going to move to test at home - I mean, on air flights and that kind of thing,” Biden said of the call before departing the White House for his home in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware.

Earlier this year the White House explored a domestic vaccination requirement for flights, or one requiring either vaccination or proof of negative test. But officials have not been eager to mandate vaccination for domestic air travel because they expected it to face immediate legal challenges, mitigating its potential effectiveness as a tool to drive up vaccinations.

Pressed last week on why Biden had not mandated vaccinations for domestic air travel, White House press secretary Jen Psaki told MSNBC that “we know that masking can be, is, very effective on airplanes.”

“We also know that putting in place that additional restriction might delay flights, might have additional implications,” she added. “We would do it, though, if the health impact was overwhelming. So we rely always on the advice of our health and medical experts. That isn’t a step at this point that they had determined we need to take.”

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show more than 241 million Americans, about 77% of the eligible population aged 5 and over, have received at least one shot of a COVID-19 vaccine. Officials believe, though, that there is some over-count in the figures due to record-keeping errors in the administration of booster shots.

Since the summer, the Biden administration has embraced various vaccination requirements as a way to get unvaccinated Americans to roll up their sleeves. It has instituted requirements that federal workers, federal contractors, and those who work in health care get their shots, and that employers with 100 or more employees institute vaccination-or-testing requirements for their workers.

Those vaccination requirements have been mired in legal wrangling, with the Supreme Court set to hear arguments Jan. 7 in cases seeking to overturn them.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Biden: ‘no federal solution’; states do more</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/27/president-joe-biden-declares-no-federal-solution-u/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/27/president-joe-biden-declares-no-federal-solution-u/</a>
GIST	<p>President Biden on Monday delivered a cryptic warning to the nation’s governors when he said there is “no federal solution” to the COVID-19 outbreaks and called on the states to do more.</p> <p>The message was in stark contrast to his campaign pledge to “crush the virus” with a federal response that he said eluded former President Donald Trump.</p> <p>“There is no federal solution. This gets solved at the state level,” Mr. Biden said on a conference call with the governors about the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.</p> <p>Though Mr. Biden sought to assure the governors that the federal response would not hamper their efforts, his call for more help from states underscored the administrations’ failure to bring the pandemic under control.</p> <p>Mr. Biden’s efforts to stop the spread of the virus include a vaccine mandate for federal workers and private businesses, a push for increased testing and mask requirements in federal buildings, airports, and public transportation.</p> <p>And yet, since taking office, more than 400,000 people have died in the U.S. from COVID-19, roughly the same number of deaths attributed to the virus in 2020.</p> <p>Mr. Biden’s critics pounced on his concession that there is “no federal solution.”</p>

“He’s trying to avoid blame for his incompetence. If he really believes this, he should rescind his unconstitutional federal [vaccination] mandates,” tweeted Sen. Tom Cotton, Arkansas Republican.

The president’s call for the states to get more involved was in response to Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, a Republican, cautioning Mr. Biden not to step on state’s rights while fighting the pandemic.

“One word of concern or encouragement for your team is that as you look towards federal solutions that will help alleviate the challenge, make sure that we do not let federal solutions stand in the way of state solutions,” Mr. Hutchinson said.

The governors also pressed Mr. Biden on the shortage of coronavirus tests as the surge of the omicron variant has sent consumers racing to buy testing kits only to discover long lines and sold-out stores.

“We, as governors, are getting pressure to do more, and the need is great to do more in terms of the rapid test and the availability of it,” Mr. Hutchinson told the president.

Mr. Biden said that when he took office, no over-the-counter at-home coronavirus tests were available and now almost 200 million tests have hit the market. Still, he admitted that’s insufficient to satisfy demand as omicron cases rapidly increase.

“It’s clearly not enough,” Mr. Biden said. “If we had known, we would have gone harder quicker. ... We have to do better.”

Monday’s call marked Mr. Biden’s first time joining the weekly call between his COVID-19 response team and the governors.

Speaking with reporters after the call, Mr. Biden denied a Vanity Fair report alleging that the administration rejected a plan to ramp up COVID-19 testing ahead of the holidays.

“We didn’t reject it,” Mr. Biden said, without elaborating.

The magazine reported that it obtained a 10-page plan from testing experts calling for roughly 732 million tests per month ahead of the holidays. The plan was outlined to Biden officials on a Zoom call on Oct. 22, according to the report.

If adopted, the plan would likely have avoided the long lines and empty shelves at pharmacies across the country.

Administration officials told the experts — which included researchers from Harvard, the Rockefeller Foundation, the COVID Collaborative and other organizations — that the plan was “dead.” Instead, the administration announced plans to move tests more swiftly through the FDA’s regulatory approval process, according to the magazine.

Officials also told the experts they couldn’t approve the plan, preferring to implement “smaller-scale plans,” it said.

The Biden administration last week used the Defense Production Act to get 200 million to 500 million COVID-19 tests to market free of charge to Americans.

The testing shortage has been a particularly stinging thorn in the administration’s side since Mr. Biden made the lack of COVID-19 test a chief criticism of Mr. Trump. He called it a “failure of planning, leadership and execution.”

Despite the latest bid to ramp up testing, the administration has not signed a contract to buy tests, and the website order will not be ready until January.

	<p>The administration has been mum about how many tests people can order and when they will be shipped once they are ordered.</p> <p>White House press secretary Jen Psaki last week dismissed concerns about the lack of a contract. She said it is just a matter of time before it is finalized.</p> <p>“We have no concern about the contract being finalized,” she said. “We’re just working to finalize the contracts. We just announced this two days ago. But there’s no — we don’t see any issue or any halt to getting that done and finalizing that.”</p> <p>Mr. Biden said Monday that the government will continue to use the Defense Production Act — a relic from the Korean War that allows the government to prioritize contracts on items deemed necessary for national defense — to produce tests.</p> <p>While Americans are waiting to order the tests, they’ve flocked to local pharmacies only to be met with long lines and empty shelves.</p> <p>Consumers are buying so many in-home testing kits that some stores have imposed limits on how many can be purchased. Walgreens, for example, has limited tests to four per person.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Pentagon defends vaccine mandate: court</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/27/pentagons-covid-vaccine-battle-heads-court/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/27/pentagons-covid-vaccine-battle-heads-court/</a>
GIST	<p>The Pentagon’s battle against COVID-19 vaccine holdouts is headed for the courtroom.</p> <p>While the big question centers on whether the U.S. military has overstepped its legal authority by ordering all service members to be vaccinated, the battle is expected to play out across several fronts over the coming weeks and months.</p> <p>The Defense Department is facing multiple high-stakes legal fights rife with national security implications. This includes clashes with Republican governors who claim full control over National Guard forces and the Pentagon’s hard line against troops seeking COVID-19 vaccine waivers on religious grounds.</p> <p>The cases will encompass matters of federalism, First Amendment rights, and other key questions forming the backdrop for what has emerged over the past year as the most controversial military health initiative in U.S. history.</p> <p>Active-duty coronavirus vaccination deadlines for each military service went by weeks ago. With thousands of service members still refusing immunization and seemingly willing to lose their careers over the matter, the Marine Corps, Army, Navy and Air Force are now faced with kicking out the unvaccinated.</p> <p>Army Public Affairs has indicated the Pentagon will start removing unvaccinated soldiers “beginning in January.”</p> <p>Powerful Republican lawmakers are throwing their legal weight behind troops who say they have deep religious or moral objections to the vaccine.</p> <p>In mid-December, eight GOP senators and nearly 40 members of the House filed an amicus brief in federal court backing more than two dozen Navy SEALs who have lodged religious objections against Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin’s vaccine mandate.</p> <p>The group of SEALs have a lawsuit pending against the Biden administration over the vaccine mandate in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas.</p>

The amicus brief signed by such prominent Republicans as Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas and Mike Lee of Utah asserts the SEALs, along with other military personnel, deserve the freedom to choose whether or not to be vaccinated.

“Our men and women in uniform have fought to protect the freedoms that every American, regardless of belief, enjoys,” the brief states. “Now they ask this court to protect their religious freedom from encroachment by the very government they have sworn to protect with their lives.”

The Pentagon has not approved any religious waivers relating to the vaccine, despite thousands of requests that have been lodged by forces across the services.

The most intriguing legal battle may stem from the Pentagon’s clash with Republican governors over vaccine requirements for National Guard personnel.

Led by Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, at least a half-dozen GOP-led states argue that Guard forces remain under the state’s control until they’re called up for federal duty, asserting that the forces are not currently subject to Mr. Austin’s mandate.

Mr. Stitt and Oklahoma’s state attorney general filed a federal lawsuit in early December challenging the Pentagon’s vaccination mandate. In a statement at the time, Mr. Stitt argued that Mr. Austin has overstepped his constitutional authority.

For his part, the defense secretary has warned that any Guard troops not vaccinated by their service’s respective deadline can’t participate in drills and subsequently won’t be paid.

Legal scholars say the governors face an uphill battle against the Pentagon chief’s mandate.

“The governors are certainly free to request Secretary Austin to withdraw his directive, but the law doesn’t compel him to do so. The fact is that he has the legal authority to require members of the National Guard to meet certain vaccination standards,” said retired Air Force Gen. Charles J. Dunlap Jr., executive director of Duke University’s Center on Law, Ethics and National Security.

“If a governor wants a ‘militia’ force free from all federal requirements, they can establish — and fund — their own state defense force separate from the Guard, but no federal money or equipment would flow to it,” Gen. Dunlap told The Washington Times.

Mr. Stitt’s actions in Oklahoma, meanwhile, have inspired other Republican governors around the country.

Following Mr. Stitt’s assertion that he will not enforce the vaccine mandate on Oklahoma National Guard forces, the governors of Iowa, Alaska, Wyoming, Mississippi and Nebraska have all said they too will not enforce the mandate on forces in their own states.

The group of governors also wrote a collective letter to Mr. Austin, arguing that they retain control of Guard forces unless and until the forces are activated for federal duty.

‘Their pledge to serve’

The Republican governors have made a broader case about the potential fallout for America’s armed forces if the vaccine mandate remains in place as currently constructed.

“It’s unconscionable to think the government will go so far as to strip these honorable men and women of the nation’s top duties if they don’t comply,” Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds said in a statement accompanying the mid-December letter she and the other Republican governors sent to Mr. Austin.

The Pentagon has argued that military readiness — even at the National Guard level — could suffer as a result of unvaccinated personnel.

“As I’ve said before, vaccination of the force will save lives and is essential to our readiness,” Mr. Austin wrote in a November memo laying out the new vaccination policy for National Guard forces.

While governors have a great deal of authority over Guard troops, legal scholars generally agree the authority does not mean Guard troops can be exempted from federal regulations, such as health standards.

Some specialists also argue there is a clear precedent for federal guidelines overriding a governor’s wishes.

“There is no good authority for this muscular conception of a state governor’s commander-in-chief power over the National Guard,” according to Michel Paradis, a senior attorney with the Defense Department’s Military Commissions Defense Organization, and Emily Eslinger, a research fellow for the National Institute of Military Justice.

The two wrote in a recent analysis for the website Lawfare that “governors have made similar arguments [in the past] for residual power over National Guard members of their respective states in the past and lost.”

On the specific question of authority over vaccinations, Mr. Paradis and Ms. Eslinger argued that “federal regulations of the militia supplant any residual commander-in-chief power a governor might retain.”

“If a state governor issues an order contrary to federal law,” they wrote, “that order is unlawful and subordinates follow it in violation of federal law at their peril.”

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HEADLINE	12/27 Russia: security talks w/US after holidays
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/27/russian-foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov-security-ta/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/27/russian-foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov-security-ta/</a>
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — Talks between Russia and the United States on Moscow’s demand for Western guarantees precluding NATO’s expansion to Ukraine will start immediately after the New Year holidays, Russia’s top diplomat announced Monday.</p> <p>“It is with the U.S. that we will carry out the main work of negotiations, which will take place immediately after the New Year holidays end,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in an interview Monday. The holidays in Russia will last for 10 days, through Jan. 9.</p> <p>Earlier this month, Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance’s military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. Washington and its allies have refused to provide such pledges, but said they are ready for the talks.</p> <p>The demands, contained in a proposed Russia-U.S. security treaty and a security agreement between Moscow and NATO, were drafted amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has stoked fears of a possible invasion. Russia has denied it has plans to attack its neighbor but pressed for legal guarantees that would rule out NATO expansion and weapons deployment there.</p> <p>Lavrov said last week that, in addition to talks with the U.S., Moscow will start separate talks with NATO on the issue, as well as separate negotiations under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.</p>



	<p>It is important that “our proposals aren’t wound up in endless discussions, which the West is famous for and which it knows how to do, that there is a result of all these diplomatic efforts,” Lavrov said Monday.</p> <p>NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has decided to convene a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council on Jan. 12, a NATO official said Saturday, adding that the bloc was in touch with Russia about the meeting.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Monday confirmed the meeting will take place, calling talks with NATO “important,” but said the details of the meeting are “in the works” and the date is still to be confirmed.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Truckers driven down: long hours, low pay</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/27/us-truck-drivers-economy-pay-conditions">https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/27/us-truck-drivers-economy-pay-conditions</a>
GIST	<p>Tim Clemons has driven nearly 3m miles around the US in his 30 years as a truck driver. “This used to be a great job,” said Clemons. “I provide a valuable service to this country. It would be nice if we weren’t looked down upon like trash.”</p> <p>While the industry says there is a national shortage of drivers and complains regulation is holding back hiring, Florida-based Clemons has another theory: working conditions have deteriorated since he started driving, he said. It’s more difficult to find parking and access to bathrooms. Dispatchers and brokers are pushing harder to deliver loads in a certain amount of time or else drivers face fines or deductions. Drivers earn less.</p> <p>All these factors may explain why annual turnover at big trucking employers <a href="#">averaged 94%</a> between 1995 and 2017. And that’s before Covid upended the supply chain and increased demand for drivers, and the pressures they face.</p> <p>Most facilities Clemons drives to do not provide bathrooms for truck drivers, and many truck stops are backed up with wait times to refuel and use the bathroom.</p> <p>“If you haven’t found a place to park by 2 or 3pm in a truck stop, you’re looking for any place to park, yet we’re fined and towed for just trying to be safe,” Clemons said. “When you have a 300-mile run and six to seven hours to be there, you don’t have time to waste, so either you’re late or you’re on time and refused use of the facilities. As nasty as it may sound, most of us experienced drivers carry garbage bags and a five-gallon bucket, or a potty chair with plastic grocery bags.”</p> <p>According to the American Trucking Associations, the lobbying organization for large trucking employers, the US has a <a href="#">shortage</a> of 80,000 truck drivers that is disrupting the nation’s supply chains, and the shortages are projected to worsen over the next few years.</p> <p>This claim has been repeated consistently over the years and has recently been <a href="#">cited</a> by industry groups in favor of a bill in Congress to lower the commercial driver’s license age requirement from 21 to 18. But truck drivers are quick to highlight the low pay, poor treatment and tough working conditions they endure throughout the industry as prevailing issues for employers who claim to have trouble finding and retaining enough drivers.</p> <p>“The industry has recycled this narrative about every three months for over 20 years. There is no truck driver shortage,” said Desiree Wood, the president of Real Women in Trucking. “It is indeed a pay shortage and work conditions issue.”</p> <p>The Bureau of Labor Statistics published an <a href="#">article</a> in March 2019 discussing the widespread and constant claims of labor shortages in the trucking industry, but found that if wages rise in the industry, any long-term labor shortages would be improved. “As a whole, the market for truck drivers appears to work as well as any other blue-collar labor market,” the report concluded.</p>

Darrell Kirkland, a truck driver based in Georgia for 31 years, explained the various ways in which truck drivers are taken advantage of by operators and shipping receivers, such as working several hours a day without pay due to waiting to pick up or drop off loads. He has waited up to 36 hours, with typical wait times of several hours.

“Most drivers don’t get paid for the detention times,” said Kirkland. “A trucking company may allow their customers a two- to three-hour time period, before they start charging detention. So that waiting time the driver doesn’t get paid for and it uses up the driver’s available hours to drive for the day.”

Truck drivers are often charged lumbar fees by receiving companies to unload freight, and won’t allow drivers to unload trucks themselves, adding more unpaid time to drivers’ schedules.

“Most driver pay is pay per mile, but it varies from one company to another,” added Kirkland. “If the wheels aren’t turning, the driver isn’t earning.”

[Nearly 2 million Americans](#) work as truck drivers, a rate that has steadily increased over the years from [about 1.57 million](#) truck drivers in 2000. States [issue](#) more than 450,000 commercial driver’s licenses per year.

While more Americans are working as truck drivers, wages have drastically declined since the passage of the Motor Carrier Act of 1980, which [deregulated](#) the US trucking industry.

When adjusted for inflation, median wages for truck drivers in 1980 were [about \\$110,000 annually](#). In 2020, [median annual wages](#) for truck drivers were \$47,130. [Nearly 40%](#) of US truck drivers were covered by union contracts in 1983, which dropped to [10.1%](#) in 2020. Many trucking companies also [misclassify](#) drivers as independent contractors, shifting overhead costs on to workers and burdening them with massive amounts of debt for their vehicles, gas and fees.

Billy Randel, a truck driver based in the New York area for decades and chief organizer of Truckers Movement for Justice, explained that most truck drivers work 60 to 70 hours a week without overtime pay, as many of the hours are unpaid wait times, from waiting to load and unload, to department of transportation inspections, or having to clean out trailers before picking up a new load.

“We’re fed up and we’re tired of having no voice and we’re the power in the industry. Nothing moves without us,” said Randel. “There are too many drivers out here who are homeless and they stay on the road because they have no place to live.

“There are too many drivers that actually qualify for federal food-stamp assistance. We want to end the sharecropping outright, and take back the power drivers once had when we were organized many decades ago.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Alarm at rise in child Covid infections</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/27/us-child-covid-omicron-infections-school-closures">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/27/us-child-covid-omicron-infections-school-closures</a>
GIST	<p>As US regional health authorities reacted with alarm to a jump in child Covid infections that caused some school districts to announce returns to remote learning, a leading public health official questioned the need for schools to close, saying: “We know how to keep schools open, we know how to keep them safe.”</p> <p>Over the past three weeks, as Omicron-related cases soared in <a href="#">New York</a> City and elsewhere, the number of children hospitalised in New York with Covid-19 quadrupled, the state health department said.</p>

The California state epidemiologist Dr Erica Pan [wrote](#) on Twitter: “Unfortunately New York is seeing an increase in pediatric hospitalisations (primarily amongst the unvaccinated), and they have similar [five- to 11-year-old] vaccination rates.”

Across New York state, about 16% of five- to 11-year-olds and 71% of 12- to 17-year-olds are fully vaccinated.

“Please give your children the gift of vaccine protection as soon as possible as our case [numbers] are increasing rapidly,” Pan wrote.

Rising numbers of pediatric cases have convinced officials in some states to order a return to remote learning after the winter break. Around 300 schools in Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico and New York will remain closed.

In Mount Vernon, a New York suburb, virtual learning is scheduled until at least 18 January.

“I have been very reluctant to close schools but given the current trends in Covid cases it would be risky not to do so,” district superintendent Kenneth Hamilton wrote.

In Maryland, Prince George’s county public schools, one of the 20 largest districts in the US, transitioned more than 136,500 students to virtual learning last week.

The district chief executive, Monica Goldson, told families staff “must be able to deliver in-person instruction and other activities in conditions that prioritise their own health, as well as the wellbeing of the school community.

“The increased positivity rates have significantly challenged the ability to do so, causing anxiety among many school communities and disruption to the school day.”

In New Jersey, Paterson public schools will start 2022 with two weeks remote.

“A surge of new cases has occurred in north-eastern New Jersey and it is expected that the trend will continue through the holiday break,” said the superintendent, Eileen Shafer.

Some officials have expressed frustration. Dan Domenech, director of the School Superintendents Association, told Newsweek: “Just when we thought this past October – when we had about 98% of kids back in schools in person – that things were moving in the right direction, here we are right back where we were last year.”

On Sunday, a leading health expert questioned the need for any schools to close.

Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, told Fox News Sunday: “We know how to keep schools open, we know how to keep them safe. This really shouldn’t even be on the table. I’m disappointed to see this happening.

“We know that for kids being in school is the right thing for them, for their mental health, for their education. And we have all sorts of tools to keep schools open so I don’t really understand why school districts are [closing schools].

“... There could be times when you have such severe short staffing shortages that it may be hard to keep schools going. That really should be the only context I think at this point.”

Concern about Omicron infections among children remains high, however. On Friday, Christmas Eve, the New York health department warned healthcare providers of rising numbers of child hospitalisations around New York City, where Omicron was first recorded on US soil.

	<p>The department warned that admissions rose four-fold from the week starting 5 December to the week starting 19 December. Approximately half the admissions were of children under five and thus not eligible for vaccines. For the week starting 19 December, none of the five- to 11-year-old patients were fully vaccinated.</p> <p>“The risks of Covid-19 for children are real,” said acting state health commissioner Dr Mary Bassett. “We are alerting New Yorkers to this recent striking increase in pediatric Covid-19 admissions so that pediatricians, parents and guardians can take urgent action to protect our youngest New Yorkers.”</p> <p>The health department advised parents to protect “children who are five years and older by getting them fully vaccinated and protect children under five by making sure all of those around them have protection through vaccination, boosters, mask-wearing, avoiding crowds and testing”.</p> <p>The California public health director, Dr Tomás Aragón, warned to expect rising admissions there.</p> <p>“Why? Omicron is so contagious that it finds unvaccinated/non-immune people who are most vulnerable for hospitalisations and deaths.”</p> <p>Throughout the pandemic, experts have said children are less likely to develop serious illness. For the week from 9 to 16 December, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported 169,964 pediatric Covid-19 cases, representing 1.8% to 4.1% of hospitalised patients.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/27 Germany toughens Covid restrictions</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/27/germany-toughens-covid-restrictions-omicron-variant-takes-hold">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/27/germany-toughens-covid-restrictions-omicron-variant-takes-hold</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Germans across large parts of the country face a tightening of rules governing both private and public spaces in an effort to slow down a wave of coronavirus infections triggered by the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Gatherings both indoors and outdoors are to be restricted in size from Monday, with leisure facilities – from gyms to swimming pools and nightclubs to cinemas – shutting in several states and restaurants facing earlier closing times.</p> <p>New-year fireworks displays, typically carried out by private households and held on the majority of German streets, have been cancelled for a second year in a row.</p> <p>Tighter protection measures will apply to those who have so far not taken up the offer to be vaccinated, or those who for medical reasons are not able to do so, but the vaccinated and those who have recovered from Covid-19 will also face a new range of limitations.</p> <p>Private gatherings are being restricted in areas which had not already introduced the rule in the run-up to Christmas to a maximum of 10 people, for those who are vaccinated or recovered. In the case of unvaccinated people, up to two other external people per household are allowed to come together. Children under 14 are excluded from the quota.</p> <p>A requirement to wear a medical mask, introduced almost a year ago, remains in place in shops and on public transport, as does the need to show a vaccine certificate in those venues where access is only possible for those who are vaccinated.</p> <p>Policymakers say the plan is to dampen the spread of the far more infectious Omicron variant, and to use the time gained from slowing it down, to deliver booster shots to as many Germans as possible.</p> <p>Just under 71% of Germans have so far received two doses of vaccine, and just under 36% have received a booster jab.</p>

Before Christmas, the chancellor, Olaf Scholz, set a target for vaccines to have been delivered to 80% of the population by 7 January. But the government admitted on Monday it was behind schedule and would have to extend the deadline to the end of January.

Germany's health minister, Karl Lauterbach, has repeatedly said he is closely observing events in the UK and speaking to his counterpart there, where Omicron is thought to be around two to three weeks ahead of where it is in Germany.

Omicron has so far been detected in all 16 German states but has not yet got the upper hand over the Delta variant, which remains dominant but is expected to be overtaken in the coming days.

Experts say Germany could have up to 700,000 cases a day leading to mass quarantines. Emergency measures have been put in place to allow the army and the federal agency for technical relief to step in and ensure vital services are upheld such as refuse collection and energy provision.

Resistance to the protective measures led to new demonstrations on Sunday, most visibly in Berlin and the city of Schweinfurt in Bavaria, where police were attacked as protesters turned violent. More protests are scheduled across the country in the coming days.

Politicians have been reluctant to talk of introducing a further nationwide lockdown, hoping instead that the current wave of measures will suffice.

Christian Drosten, head virologist at the Charité hospital in Berlin, said it "remained to be seen when and whether" the measures would work. If not, he suggested introducing restrictions that would only allow those who had been boosted with a third injection and therefore had far greater protection than those who were double-jabbed, to enjoy wider freedom.

Markus Söder, the leader of Bavaria, led the call by politicians to reduce the length of time for which people had to go into quarantine, to just five days if they were symptom free, arguing that otherwise large parts of German life would be in danger of grinding to a halt as Omicron took hold.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Officials shorten infected isolation period</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/health/omicron-cdc.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/health/omicron-cdc.html</a>
GIST	<p>As daily coronavirus cases in the United States soared to near record levels, federal health officials on Monday shortened by half the recommended isolation period for many infected Americans, hoping to minimize rising disruptions to the economy and everyday life.</p> <p>Virus-related staff shortages have upended holiday travel, leading to the cancellation of thousands of flights, and now threaten industries as diverse as health care, restaurants and retail. Yet health experts warn the country is only in the early stages of a fast-moving surge.</p> <p>"The Omicron variant is spreading quickly and has the potential to impact all facets of our society," said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>The agency had previously recommended that infected patients isolate for 10 days from when they were tested for the virus. But on Monday, <a href="#">it slashed that period to five days</a> for those without symptoms, or those without fevers whose other symptoms were resolving.</p> <p>Americans leaving isolation should wear masks around others for an additional five days after their isolation periods have ended, officials said.</p> <p>The updated guidance comes amid a rising tide of infections that threatens to swamp the U.S. health care system, particularly given that tens of millions remain unvaccinated. The new recommendations "balance</p>

what we know about the spread of the virus and the protection provided by vaccination and booster doses,” Dr. Walensky said. “These updates ensure people can safely continue their daily lives.”

Still, the C.D.C. did not recommend that people take rapid tests before ending their isolation periods, a step that scientists said would offer considerably more reassurance that people were not continuing to spread the virus.

Health officials also shortened the quarantine period for certain uninfected Americans who were exposed to the virus. They said that people who were unvaccinated had to quarantine for just five days after exposure, down from 14 days. That also applied to people who were six months past receiving the primary series of the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines, or two months past a Johnson & Johnson shot, but who had not received booster shots.

Officials also said that uninfected Americans who had received booster shots did not need to quarantine at all after exposure. But people who have been exposed are encouraged to wear masks around other people for 10 days and get tested five days after being exposed.

Last week, the C.D.C. reduced, in some circumstances, the number of days it recommended that health care workers who test positive must isolate.

The Omicron variant has moved with extraordinary swiftness across the country, from New York to Hawaii, both of which reported more coronavirus cases in the past week than in any other seven-day period of the pandemic. Delaware, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Puerto Rico have also reported record caseloads.

On Sunday, the seven-day national average of new daily cases climbed past 214,000, an 83 percent jump over the past 14 days. Deaths also increased by 3 percent during that time, to a seven-day average of 1,328, [according to a New York Times database](#).

Hospitalizations are up, too, although not as much as cases. More than 71,000 Americans are hospitalized with Covid-19, 8 percent higher than two weeks ago but still well below previous peaks.

In New York, Mayor Bill de Blasio on Monday implemented what he cast as the most sweeping [vaccine mandate for private businesses](#) in the nation. [All employers in New York City now have to verify that their on-site workers](#) have received at least one dose of a vaccine.

In Puerto Rico, new travel guidelines went into effect, requiring all passengers arriving on domestic flights to show a negative Covid test upon arrival or risk a fine. In Massachusetts, where Gov. Charlie Baker has [activated](#) the National Guard, 300 members were sent on Monday to acute-care hospitals and ambulance service providers.

In a conference call with governors on Monday, President Biden spoke of cooperation at various levels of government. Asa Hutchinson, the Republican governor of Arkansas, praised the president’s plan to give away 500 million rapid at-home tests, but said that federal efforts to stanch the infections must yield to state remedies.

“Look, there is no federal solution,” Mr. Biden replied. “This gets solved at the state level.”

“Ultimately it gets down to where the rubber meets the road, and that’s where the patient is in need of help or preventing the need for help,” he added.

On Monday, some business owners said the new C.D.C. guidance was helpful in addressing staffing shortages, as waves of workers fall sick. But they said that it still left employers and their workers with the challenge of determining how long people should isolate on a case-by-case basis.



“It’s a common-sense change, but it doesn’t really take the burden away,” said Barbara Sibley, who runs four restaurants in New York City and is currently isolating with Covid.

Unions warned that companies could use the guidance as a pretext to rush employees with symptoms back to work, exacerbating the pressures on workers resulting from a lack of paid sick leave. “We cannot allow pandemic fatigue to lead to decisions that extend the life of the pandemic or put policies on the backs of workers,” said Sara Nelson, the president of a flight attendants union.

With Americans wearying of pandemic restrictions and cases rising, some scientists said that narrowing isolation periods for infected people was overdue.

Dr. Ashish K. Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, said that people were generally some days into their infections by the time they tested positive, shortening the period afterward during which they remained infectious.

He also said that the personal and social costs of 10-day isolation periods were considerable, citing the difficulty facing single parents, for example. He worried that some people, especially those relying on hourly wages, had been resisting getting tested in the first place because of the toll of missing work.

“It’s hugely harmful asking people to unnecessarily isolate,” Dr. Jha said. “If you can shorten that isolation in a clinically responsible way, I think it does lower the bar for people to go ahead and get tested.”

Dr. Jha said he wished that the C.D.C. had recommended negative rapid test results before people ended their isolation. “But given that tests are not widely available,” Dr. Jha added, “this is a reasonable approach.”

But Dr. Michael Mina, an immunologist and expert on rapid tests, called the C.D.C.’s new guidance “reckless.” Studies have demonstrated wide variations in the periods during which people remained contagious.

And with more people now testing regularly, other scientists said, some may be catching their infections in the very early stages. In those cases, five days may be insufficient to stop people from spreading the virus.

“I think this is a remarkable policy shift,” said Joseph Fauver, a genomic epidemiologist at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. “I’m a little surprised at them cutting it in half without having a testing requirement associated with it or based on vaccine status.”

A study that Dr. Fauver co-authored on the duration of infections with an earlier variant in N.B.A. personnel established that vaccinated people cleared the virus sooner, he said. But he said that the change of tack from the C.D.C. had not been accompanied by data backing up the agency’s assertions.

Vaccination is still a strong protector against severe illness. Unvaccinated people are five times as likely to test positive, and 14 times as likely to die of Covid, compared with vaccinated patients, according to the C.D.C.

Still, only 62 percent of Americans are fully vaccinated, and the nation’s medical infrastructure is dangerously frayed two years into the pandemic as hospitals contend with staff shortages fueled by burnout and early retirements.

Public health experts warned that the most severe disruptions could still be ahead.

Past surges of the coronavirus have been regional, allowing states to reallocate resources like monoclonal antibodies, while this wave threatens to overtake the country at once, said Michael Osterholm, a professor and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota.

“With this one, all 50 states are in the soup at the same time. It’s like every state is being hit by a viral hurricane,” he said.

Dr. Osterholm predicts that in the next three to five weeks, a substantial share of health care workers will get infected and be unable to work, straining an overburdened system. “We’re already stretched so thin,” he said.

Scientists said those staffing shortages — in hospitals and nursing homes, but also in restaurants, retail stores and airline workforces — had increased the urgency of re-evaluating isolation periods. And at-home rapid tests had given people the ability to get a rough, if imperfect, measure of whether they were contagious.

But the scarcity of those tests over the holiday period made loosening isolation recommendations significantly more fraught, scientists said. Several experts, including Dr. Jha, said that two negative rapid tests on consecutive days would offer more reassurance that someone was not contagious.

A lack of widespread access to tests, some scientists said, had made changing isolation policies more difficult.

“I think it’s tricky, because they’re trying to prepare for a crisis situation,” Jeremy Kamil, a virologist at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center Shreveport, said of federal health officials. “There are so many unknowns.”

Data out of South Africa and some European countries suggest that Omicron infections have been milder and are producing fewer hospitalizations. But experts warn that might not be true everywhere.

“We cannot assume the same things will happen to the U.S.,” said Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist and researcher at the Yale School of Medicine. “That is not a reason to relax our measures here, and we still need to vaccinate those pockets of people who are unvaccinated.”

Bill Hanage, an epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, cautioned that it remained unclear how well rapid tests measured contagiousness with Omicron, given the possibility that lower levels of virus could initiate infections.

But he said that vaccinated people may only shed the Omicron variant “in large amounts for a short period.” He added that the variant’s rapid spread could quickly shut workplaces: “We don’t want that in health care.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Thousands of flight disruptions continue</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/27/world/cdc-quarantine-isolation-guidelines#weekend-flights-canceled-omicron">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/27/world/cdc-quarantine-isolation-guidelines#weekend-flights-canceled-omicron</a>
GIST	<p>Flight disruptions in the United States continued on Monday as many people embarked on their first trips in almost two years, and Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, again raised the possibility of a vaccination requirement for air travel.</p> <p>At least 2,600 more flights were canceled Monday, including about 1,000 U.S. flights, as the highly transmissible Omicron variant of the coronavirus is sending daily caseloads in parts of the United States <a href="#">soaring to levels</a> higher than last winter’s pandemic peak.</p> <p>While the cancellations were only a small percentage of overall flights, the problem threatened to extend into the holiday week.</p>

“When you make vaccination a requirement, that’s another incentive to get more people vaccinated,” Dr. Fauci [said](#) on MSNBC on Monday. “If you want to do that with domestic flights, I think that’s something that seriously should be considered.”

Over the holiday weekend, airlines canceled thousands of flights as the Omicron variant hit flight crews. In all, about 2,300 U.S. flights were canceled on Saturday and Sunday of Christmas weekend, with more than 3,500 more grounded globally, [according to FlightAware](#), which provides aviation data. On Sunday alone, more than 1,300 U.S. flights and nearly 1,700 additional ones worldwide were canceled.

While some of the groundings were caused by bad weather and maintenance issues, several airlines acknowledged that the current wave of coronavirus cases had contributed significantly. A JetBlue spokesman said the airline had “seen an increasing number of sick calls from Omicron.”

Twelve percent of JetBlue flights, 6 percent of Delta Air Lines flights, 5 percent of United Airlines flights and 2 percent of American Airlines flights on Sunday were canceled, according to FlightAware.

The stock prices of United, Delta, American and Southwest — the four [largest](#) U.S. carriers — were slightly lower on Monday.

Traveling rebounded sharply this year, making the situation at airports worse: Roughly two million people passed through screening checkpoints each day last week, [according to the Transportation Security Administration](#), and on Sunday. The numbers on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were much higher than last year, and some figures even exceeded those of the same days two years ago, when virtually no Americans were aware of a virus beginning to circulate halfway around the world.

The Omicron variant, which is now responsible for more than 70 percent of the new coronavirus cases in the United States, has already helped push daily case averages in the United States above 200,000 for the first time in nearly 12 months, [according to The New York Times’s coronavirus tracker](#).

An airline trade group has [asked](#) the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to shorten the recommended isolation period for fully vaccinated employees who test positive to a maximum of five days, from 10 days, before they can return with a negative test.

“Swift and safe adjustments by the C.D.C. would alleviate at least some of the staffing pressures and set up airlines to help millions of travelers returning from their holidays,” said Derek Dombrowski, a JetBlue spokesman.

The flight attendants’ union, however, has argued that reductions in recommended isolation times should be decided on “by public health professionals, not airlines.”

Some of this weekend’s delays had little to do with the pandemic. Alaska Airlines had only a few cancellations related to crew exposures to the coronavirus, said a spokeswoman, Alexa Rudin. Yet it canceled 170 flights those two days, according to FlightAware, including 21 percent of its Sunday flights, because of unusually cold and snowy weather in the Pacific Northwest, which affected its hub, Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

The pandemic has also caused a [shortage](#) of train and bus workers nationwide. In New York City, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is also dealing with an uptick in positive cases among its staff, which is 80 percent vaccinated. It said subway service on Monday was running on a normal schedule, with scattered exceptions.

“Whatever we can do as riders to help minimize the risk to transit workers will help to reduce the spread,” said Lisa Daglian, the executive director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the M.T.A., a watchdog group. “The M.T.A. is doing what it can with the resources it has available.”

	Danny Pearlstein, a spokesman for the Riders Alliance, an advocacy group, said: “My sense is the M.T.A. is once again making the best of a bad situation.”
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 NYC private-sector vaccine mandate</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/27/world/cdc-quarantine-isolation-guidelines#nyc-vaccine-mandate">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/27/world/cdc-quarantine-isolation-guidelines#nyc-vaccine-mandate</a>
GIST	<p>Mayor Bill de Blasio on Monday implemented what he cast as the most sweeping <a href="#">vaccine mandate for private businesses</a> in the nation.</p> <p><a href="#">All employers in New York City now have to verify that their on-site workers</a> have received at least one dose of a vaccine. If employees have opted for a two-dose vaccine, they must submit proof that they have received the second dose within 45 days.</p> <p>“I am 110 percent convinced this was the right thing to do, remains the right thing to do, particularly with the ferocity of Omicron,” Mr. de Blasio said, after giving a “key to the city” to the music icon Patti Smith. “And I don’t know if there’s going to be another variant behind it, but I do know our best defense is to get everyone vaccinated and mandates have worked.”</p> <p>This is Mr. de Blasio’s last week as mayor, and it remains unclear if his successor, Mayor-elect Eric Adams, will move forward with the mandate, or if he will modify it in deference to concerns from business owners. He has consistently refused to say, and Monday proved no different.</p> <p>“The mayor-elect will make announcements on his administration’s Covid policy this week,” his spokesman, Evan Thies, said in a text message Monday morning.</p> <p>During his final months in office, Mr. de Blasio has come to lean heavily on vaccine mandates. He has already required vaccines for the city’s roughly 300,000 public employees, as well as for staff and patrons of restaurants, gyms and entertainment venues.</p> <p>The mandates appear to have helped drive the vaccination rate up in New York City. As of Monday, 80.5 percent of all New Yorkers had received <a href="#">at least one dose of a vaccine</a>. Nearly 72 percent were fully vaccinated.</p> <p>But the mandates have also sparked dismay among some business leaders, who argue that they should include a testing option for those who remain opposed to vaccination — particularly in light of some of the staffing challenges that businesses are facing.</p> <p>Kathryn Wylde, the chief executive of the Partnership for New York City, which represents many major corporations, said that some New Yorkers who are still resistant to vaccines are people of color who may lack trust in the health care system.</p> <p>“Ironically, most of the remote workers are vaccinated,” she said.</p> <p>But Michael Dorf, the founder of City Winery, a restaurant and music venue, supports the effort and said his own company — which employs roughly 1,000 workers nationwide, including about 400 locally — has even more stringent measures already in place.</p> <p>“Every single human breathing person coming into the building has to be vaccinated and tested,” Mr. Dorf said.</p> <p>The Supreme Court <a href="#">will in January</a> consider President Biden’s vaccine mandate for the private sector, which applies only to large employers and has a testing option.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Israel studies vaccine 4<sup>th</sup> dose effectiveness</b>
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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/27/world/cdc-quarantine-isolation-guidelines#israel-fourth-dose-covid-vaccine">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/27/world/cdc-quarantine-isolation-guidelines#israel-fourth-dose-covid-vaccine</a>
GIST	<p>An Israeli hospital on Monday began a study to test the safety and effectiveness of a fourth dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, as health officials <a href="#">continued to deliberate</a> over rolling out fourth shots for vulnerable people nationwide.</p> <p>Officials at Sheba Medical Center, near Tel Aviv, said that their study was the first of its kind in the world and involved administering an additional shot to 150 medical personnel who had received a third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at least four months ago.</p> <p>The moves in Israel, an early leader in Covid vaccinations, are being closely watched as governments worldwide struggle with how to confront the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, which is driving record numbers of new infections in parts of the <a href="#">United States</a>, <a href="#">Europe</a> and other places. Even as some studies suggest that <a href="#">Omicron infections are milder</a> than those caused by other variants, the surges are already <a href="#">stretching health systems</a>, and experts warn that it could lead to many more deaths.</p> <p>With studies showing that Covid vaccines still <a href="#">protect people from getting seriously ill from Omicron</a>, a panel of medical experts advising the Israeli government recommended last week that health officials offer a fourth shot for people ages 60 and older, for those with weaker immunity and for medical workers.</p> <p>The proposal is awaiting formal approval from the Ministry of Health, but questions have been raised about whether the recommendation was premature given the lack of data on the effects of a fourth shot. It was unclear whether the ministry would wait for the results of the hospital study to make its recommendation.</p> <p>The advisory panel acknowledged uncertainty over the effects of Omicron, but pointed to evidence of decreased immunity in people who were among the first to receive a third dose in August. Israeli data showed a doubling of the rate of infection from the Delta variant, then dominant, among the 60-plus age group within four or five months of the third shot.</p> <p>Israel, a relatively small country with an efficient public health system, was <a href="#">a leader</a> in introducing the first round of Covid vaccinations and later in giving booster shots, putting it in position to assess early how effective the shots are and how quickly the protection wears off.</p> <p>Most of the advisory panel argued that the potential benefits of a fourth dose outweighed any risks, and that there was no time to lose in making decisions to protect those most susceptible. But other experts argued that not enough was known about the effects of a fourth shot, and some scientists have raised concerns that too many shots might cause a sort of immune system fatigue, compromising the body's ability to fight the virus, particularly among older people.</p> <p>A senior Health Ministry official said last week that the ministry would gather more data from other countries, especially about the risk of severe illness from Omicron among older people, before deciding on whether to offer a fourth dose, and to whom.</p> <p>On Monday, a second ministry official said that a decision could come within days. Both officials requested anonymity to comment on the process.</p> <p>Also Monday, the Israeli Health Ministry formally accepted another of the recommendations of the advisory board, shortening the period between administering a third booster shot after the second vaccine to three months from five months.</p> <p>"Now, in light of the Omicron wave, there is an increased need to boost the level of immunity among the general population as quickly as possible," the ministry said in a statement, noting that other countries in Europe had done the same.</p>

	Most of Israel's population has received at least two doses, but about a million eligible citizens have not yet received a third booster shot, out of a total population of nine million.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 France: new restrictions amid record cases</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/27/world/cdc-quarantine-isolation-guidelines#france-sets-new-restrictions-amid-record-cases">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/27/world/cdc-quarantine-isolation-guidelines#france-sets-new-restrictions-amid-record-cases</a>
GIST	<p>The French government on Monday set new limits on large public gatherings and stricter remote-working obligations but announced few other restrictions and kept schools open, sticking to its strategy of relying mainly on vaccinations to curb a record-breaking surge of cases.</p> <p>“A new wave is unfolding across our continent with the Omicron variant,” Jean Castex, France’s prime minister, said at a news conference on Monday after a special cabinet meeting. But, he said, “vaccination remains at the heart of our strategy.”</p> <p>France reported over 100,000 new cases on Friday, a record, and the average number of daily cases reached 70,000 over the past seven days, Mr. Castex said. “Our health workers are exhausted,” he added, warning that hospitals were coming under increasing strain.</p> <p>But Mr. Castex said the government wouldn’t prolong the winter break and keep schools closed or impose a curfew on Dec. 31. He urged people to limit the size and number of their New Year’s Eve gatherings.</p> <p>Instead, the government will limit the size of large public events, to 2,000 people for indoor settings and 5,000 for outdoor ones, for at least three weeks starting next Monday, Mr. Castex said.</p> <p>When possible, working remotely will also become mandatory for at least 3 days per week, starting in January and for at least three weeks, Mr. Castex said. The isolation period for people who test positive for Covid-19 or who are in contact with anyone who is sick will also be reduced to avoid staffing shortages that could cripple the economy, he added.</p> <p>“All of this feels like a never-ending movie,” Mr. Castex acknowledged. But he said France was far better off from last year thanks to its vaccination campaign. “We must continue and amplify this progress, to face the new wave,” he said.</p> <p>President Emmanuel Macron, who is up for re-election in four months, has consistently refused to impose new curfews, closures or lockdowns, opting instead to focus his efforts on vaccinations. Nearly 75 percent of the French population is fully vaccinated, but roughly 6 million people have not received a single shot.</p> <p>Some doctors and epidemiologists in France are growing increasingly worried that focusing solely on vaccination and shunning restrictions on public gatherings won’t be enough to prevent hospitalizations from rising significantly.</p> <p>In an open letter to France’s health minister, published in the Journal du Dimanche newspaper on Saturday, 50 health professionals expressed alarm that more than 300,000 children and adolescents had tested positive for Covid-19 since November.</p> <p>“It is important to do everything to minimize transmission risks among all age groups, and particularly in schools,” they wrote.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Record beef prices; ranchers not cashing in</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/business/beef-prices-cattle-ranchers.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/business/beef-prices-cattle-ranchers.html</a>
GIST	SHEPHERD, Montana — Judging from the <a href="#">prices at supermarkets and restaurants</a> , this would appear to be a lucrative moment for cattle ranchers like Steve Charter.



America is consuming more beef than ever, while prices have climbed by one-fifth over the past year — a primary driver for the growing alarm over [inflation](#).

But somewhere between American dinner plates and his 8,000-acre ranch on the high plains of Montana, Mr. Charter's share of the \$66 billion beef cattle industry has gone missing.

A third-generation cattle rancher, Mr. Charter, 69, is accustomed to working seven days a week, 365 days a year — in winter temperatures descending to minus 40, and in summer swelter reaching 110 degrees.

On a recent morning, he rumbled up a snow-cruised dirt road in his feed truck, delivering a mixture of grains to his herd of mother cows and calves. They roam a landscape that seems unbounded — grassland dotted by sagebrush, the horizons stretching beyond distant buttes.

Mr. Charter has long imagined his six grandchildren continuing his way of life. But with no profits in five years, he is pondering the fate that has befallen more than half a million other American ranchers in recent decades: selling off his herd.

“We are contemplating getting out,” Mr. Charter said, his voice catching as he choked back tears. “We are not getting our share of the consumer dollars.”

The distress of American cattle ranchers represents the underside of the staggering winnings harvested by the conglomerates that dominate the meatpacking industry — Tyson Foods and Cargill, plus a pair of companies controlled by Brazilian corporate owners, National Beef Packing Company and JBS.

Since the 1980s, the four largest meatpackers have used a wave of mergers to increase their share of the market from 36 percent to 85 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Their dominance has allowed them to extinguish competition and dictate prices, exploiting how federal authorities have weakened the enforcement of laws enacted a century ago to tame the excesses of the Robber Barons, say antitrust experts and advocates for the ranchers.

One landmark piece of legislation, the [Packers & Stockyards Act of 1921](#), was adopted by Congress to “safeguard farmers and ranchers” — among other market participants — from “unjustly discriminatory and monopolistic practices.”

Today's record high beef prices are most directly reflective of scarce stocks, another manifestation of the [Great Supply Chain Disruption](#) accompanying the pandemic. The initial spread of the coronavirus swept through slaughterhouses, [killing scores of workers](#), sickening thousands and [halting production](#). That caused shortages of beef.

But the shock landed atop decades of takeovers that closed slaughterhouses. The basic laws of economics suggest what happens when the packers cut their capacity to process beef: The supply is reduced, increasing consumer prices. At the same time, fewer slaughterhouses limits the demand for live cattle, lowering prices paid to ranchers for their animals — an advantage for the packers.

“Their goal is to control the market so that they can control the price,” said Marion Nestle, a professor of food studies and public health at New York University. “The pandemic exposed the consequences of the consolidation of the meat industry.”

The packers — now confronting [a push from the Biden administration to revive antitrust enforcement](#) — maintain that the attention on consolidation is misguided.

JBS, the largest meatpacker in the United States, declined to discuss the impact of consolidation on the market, instead referring questions to a Washington lobbying organization, the North American Meat Institute.

“Concentration has nothing to do with price,” said a spokeswoman for the organization, Sarah Little. “The cattle and beef markets are dynamic.”

As slaughterhouses work through a glut of live cattle, ranchers have in recent weeks received rising prices for their animals, she added.

Cassandra Fish, a former senior executive at Tyson who now runs a beef industry consultancy, said the shuttering of slaughterhouses by meatpackers in recent decades was prompted by the simple fact that many were losing money.

“The packers are not masterminds,” she said. “The packing industry was unprofitable for several years, so they closed plants.”

But ranchers complain that the game is rigged.

They generally raise calves, allowing them to roam across grassland until they are big enough to be sold to so-called feed lots that administer grains to bring them to slaughtering weight. The feed lots — the largest concentrated in Texas, Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado — then sell their animals to the packers.

Because the feed lots face relentless pressure from the packers for lower prices, they in turn demand cut-rate terms from the ranchers.

“A lot of people don’t understand how trapped ranchers are in this really broken system,” said Jeanie Alderson, whose family has run cattle in southeastern Montana for more than a century. “We don’t have a market.”

### **Billions for Meatpackers**

Many of the cattle raised in Montana are eventually hauled to slaughterhouses run by JBS, the world’s largest meat processor.

The two brothers who control the enterprise, Wesley and Joesley Batista, possess a fortune estimated by [Bloomberg News](#) at \$5.8 billion. Four years ago, they went to prison after pleading guilty to participation in a Brazilian bribery ring that secured loans from government-owned banks. (They have since been released.) A \$20 billion international acquisition spree put JBS in control of one-fourth of the American capacity for slaughtering beef.

While ranchers have been tallying losses, JBS has been celebrating gains — revenues of \$18 billion between July and September, which represented an increase of 32 percent compared with the same quarter in 2020.

In past decades, when beef prices rose, so would payments to cattle ranchers, who claimed over half of what consumers paid for meat. But that relationship began to break down in 2015. Last year, cattle ranchers received only 37 cents on every dollar spent on beef, according to federal data.

“You’re having consumers exploited on one end of the supply chain, cattle producers exploited on the other,” said Bill Bullard, a former rancher who now heads an advocacy group, the Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund. “The meatpackers are making all-time record profits.”

His organization is a plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit that accuses meatpackers of manipulating prices by sharply reducing their purchases of cattle at so-called sale barns — open marketplaces where animals are inspected and purchased on the spot, with the prices disclosed publicly.

Instead, the packers now overwhelmingly rely on private contracts with feed lots. Those contracts provide the feed lots with certainty that the packers will buy their animals. In exchange, the feed lots must lock into a price structure that tracks those in public auctions, where buyers are scarce.

According to industry experts, this system allows packers to lock up the overwhelming supply of cattle at prices they impose, under terms hidden from public view. Given the market dominance of the four largest packers in their regions, feed lots lack alternative places to sell their animals once they reach slaughtering weight.

“There’s no competition,” said Ty Thompson, an auctioneer at the public auction yards in Billings, Mont., who also operates his own feed lots. “We have so much supply and so little capacity, that there’s no negotiation whatsoever.”

### **Losing the Family Legacy**

In the rolling hill country of northern Missouri — a tableau of grain farms dotted by compact towns — Coy Young, a fifth-generation rancher, has concluded that raising cattle is pointless.

“You’re feeding America and going broke doing it,” he said. “It doesn’t pencil out to raise cattle in this country anymore.”

Mr. Young, 38, carries credit card debts reaching \$55,000. He plowed most of that debt into artificial insemination technology aimed at producing premium breeding cows.

His payoff was supposed to come early last year, with a sale that Mr. Young anticipated would fetch \$125,000. But the day that he trucked his herd to a nearby auction, panic over the pandemic assailed markets. Traders in Chicago pushed down the price of live cattle by more than 10 percent. Mr. Young received a bid of only \$32,000.

It was a crushing blow, a price that seemed certain to trigger his financial unraveling. Still, he had no choice but to take it. Cattle are perishable goods. Holding on to them after they reach slaughtering weight entails the costs of feeding them. They begin to add more fat than muscle.

A week later, the bank began calling Mr. Young demanding repayment. Sinking into despondency, he waited for his wife to drive to her nursing job — their means of paying the bills. He planned to kill himself, he said. When she pulled back into the driveway, having forgotten something, he reconsidered.

“You put your heart and soul into something, and then you lose your ass,” he said. “You don’t see any other way out.”

He plans to sell off his herd early next year and start a barbecue catering business.

“You’re raised a farmer, and that’s what you’re supposed to do,” he said. “It’s my family legacy. It’s like I’m losing my image as a man.”

### **What Gets Lost**

Ever since the Reagan administration, the federal government has taken a lax approach to antitrust enforcement, investing in the popular notion that when large and efficient companies are permitted to amass greater scale, consumers benefit.

That notion may now be up for readjustment.

The Biden administration and members of Congress are pressing to diminish the dominance of the meatpackers as inflation concerns intensify.

The Federal Trade Commission last month opened an inquiry into how anticompetitive practices by major companies have contributed to supply chain problems.

“The meat price increases we are seeing are not just the natural consequences of supply and demand,” senior White House economists recently declared in a blog post. “They are also the result of corporate

decisions to take advantage of their market power in an uncompetitive market, to the detriment of consumers, farmers and ranchers, and our economy.”

Last year, as the pandemic began, the Charter family recognized a full-on market failure.

“You could see a cow across the road, and you couldn’t find ground beef in Billings, Montana,” said Mr. Charter’s daughter, Annika Charter-Williams, 34.

As they made arrangements to sell about 120 head of cattle in March 2020, they reached out to a friend who owns a feed lot that sells animals to a JBS plant in Utah.

Mr. Charter was taken aback by the terms for the first load: The slaughterhouse demanded that he commit to delivering his cattle, with the price to be dictated by JBS.

“I wanted to tell him to go to hell,” Mr. Charter says. “But what choice did I have?”

His break-even point was \$1.30 a pound. “Without any consulting or any dealing, they just decided that they were going to pay me \$1 a pound,” he said.

His daughter took the disaster as the impetus for creativity. She engaged a small, local slaughterhouse to process some of their remaining animals. Then she sold the beef directly to consumers across Montana, marketing it on social media.

This resonated as a triumph — the successful sidestepping of the packers.

It was also not enough.

“It looks like we’re going to have to liquidate almost all the cattle,” Mr. Charter said.

When family ranches like his disappear, he added, so do the values that have governed their operations for generations — a commitment to caring for land and producing quality beef, rather than catering exclusively to the bottom line.

“People shouldn’t be worried about us because we’re kind of quaint and it’s nice to have the cowboys out there,” Mr. Charter said. “We need a food system that serves everyone, and not just a handful of companies.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Saudi Arabia seeks to become cultural hub</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-films-movies.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-films-movies.html</a>
GIST	<p>JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia — A pregnant Saudi woman, far from home, finds herself stalked by inner and outer demons. A wannabe Saudi vlogger and his friends, menaced by the internet’s insatiable appetite for content and more mysterious dangers, try to escape a dark forest. At a wedding, the mother of the bride panics when her daughter disappears with all of their guests waiting downstairs.</p> <p>These were just a few of the 27 Saudi-made films premiering this month at a film festival in Jeddah, part of the conservative kingdom’s huge effort to transform itself from a cultural backwater into a cinematic powerhouse in the Middle East.</p> <p>The Saudi push reflects profound shifts in the creative industries across the Arab world. Over the past century, while the name Saudi Arabia conjured little more than oil, desert and Islam, Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad stood out as the Arab cultural beacons where blockbuster movies were made, chart-topping songs were recorded and books that got intellectuals talking hit the shelves.</p>

But over the past decade, those legacies have been battered by conflicts, financial meltdowns and state failures. Years of war have damaged Syria's television studios and Baghdad's publishers. An economic collapse has left Lebanon's art-house cinemas struggling to keep the lights on.

Egypt's vaunted film industry, which made the country's dialect the most widely understood Arabic, has been in artistic decline for years, and its TV shows have been hijacked by the country's intelligence services [to promote pro-government themes](#).

In many ways, the region's cultural mantle is up for grabs, and Saudi Arabia is spending lavishly to seize it.

At the [Red Sea International Film Festival](#), held on a former execution ground, Jeddah residents rubbernecked as stars like Hilary Swank and Naomi Campbell strutted down a red carpet in revealing gowns, and Saudi influencers D.J.-ed at dance parties.

All this in a country where, until a few years ago, women were not allowed to drive, cinemas were banned and aspiring filmmakers often had to dodge the religious police to shoot in public.

"It's our time to shine here in Saudi Arabia," said Mona Khashoggi, a Saudi film and theater producer who was darting around a talent fair that the festival was holding for aspiring Saudi filmmakers. A government official had just announced that the kingdom would support the production of 100 films by 2030, showering new projects with permits, prestige and financing.

"Now that I'm a filmmaker," Ms. Khashoggi mused, "maybe I'll get money."

The change is driven by the de facto Saudi ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who wants to shake off the kingdom's staid image by building an entertainment industry to stimulate the economy and create jobs.

To build the new industry, the Saudis are tapping their country's oil wealth to fund homegrown productions, sponsor Saudi filmmakers to study abroad and establish domestic training schools, soundstages and studios. The government is financing similar initiatives to foster Saudi visual artists, musicians and chefs.

The government has enticed three big-budget Hollywood productions to film in the country with financing and government-supplied helicopters and fighter jets, hoping to overtake Jordan and Morocco as the go-to destination for spectacular desert landscapes.

During a panel discussion at the festival, Bahaa Abdulmajeed, an official from the Saudi Investment Ministry, said the kingdom had one goal, "to make Saudi Arabia a new hub for filmmaking in the region."

After Mr. Abdulmajeed enumerated the many carrots the kingdom was dangling to attract the film industry, the panel's moderator, the Variety reporter Nick Vivarelli, laughed. "OK," he said. "So the red tape will be nonexistent and you're rolling out the red carpet, in a nutshell."

Despite its deep pockets, Saudi Arabia faces big challenges.

It is decades behind in building a class of skilled creators and technicians. And many Arab professionals are reluctant to move to a socially conservative monarchy where alcohol is banned and the government jails dissenters for mild criticisms.

Some industry veterans questioned how long the Saudi movie mania would last, pointing to previous attempts by the United Arab Emirates and Qatar to create film industries by sheer force of wallet, initiatives that came up short. Others asked when the industry would become profitable, not just fueled by government oil wealth.

“As long as the idea is, ‘We will push cultural entrepreneurship provided the barrel is above \$70,’ then this is bound for failure,” said Mazen Hayek, a media communications adviser and a former spokesman for MBC, the Arab world’s largest television network, based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

To cultivate creative culture, he said, Arab countries must ensure personal freedoms, rule of law, free-market practices and tolerance, including for L.G.B.T.Q. rights.

“You are going to have freelancers who are brilliant in their sectors but who don’t necessarily want to work with governments or in state-owned enterprises,” Mr. Hayek said.

Some industry veterans wondered — with a whiff of snobbery — whether Arabs from other countries would watch Saudi films.

“In Saudi Arabia, they have the money, they have the means. But we have richness in stories,” said Philippe Aractingi, a French-Lebanese director and producer. “They are injecting huge amounts of money, but how long will they sustain it?”

In its favor, Saudi Arabia has a population of 22 million, meaning it can support a homegrown industry better than its tiny gulf neighbors, said Faisal Baltyuor, the head of a Riyadh-based film distributor, CineWaves.

Although Saudi Arabia’s population is about a fifth of Egypt’s, the Saudis are more affluent and wired, making them more likely to pay for streaming services and movie tickets. At about \$18, a ticket in Saudi theaters is among the most expensive in the world.

But the kingdom only allowed cinemas to reopen in 2018 after a 35-year ban. Before that, Saudis escaped to nearby Bahrain or Dubai to go to theaters.

Now, the country has 430 screens and counting, making it the fastest-growing market in the world, with a target of 2,600 screens by 2030, Mr. Abdulmajeed said.

Rather than drown out its neighbors, Saudi Arabia’s opening may bolster the rest of the region’s filmmakers, too.

The popularity of Egyptian content in Saudi Arabia makes it a tempting market for Egyptian studios, said Mohamed Hefzy, the head of Film Clinic, a Cairo-based production company.

Several Saudi-Egyptian collaborations are in the works, and an Egyptian “Hangover”-style comedy, “Wa’afet Reggala” (“A Stand Worthy of Men”), was the highest-grossing release in Saudi Arabia this year, beating the Hollywood blockbusters.

Saudi productions may also continue to draw acting, writing and directing talent from Lebanon, Syria and Egypt — and will most likely need to do so to reach non-Saudi audiences, said Rebecca Joubin, an Arab studies professor at Davidson College in North Carolina.

“With Saudi opening up, they say in Egypt that it’s saving Egypt’s movie industry,” said Marwan Mokbel, an Egyptian who co-wrote “Junoon,” the Saudi horror film about the vlogger that premiered at the Jeddah festival.

Saudi shows and movies are emerging as the region’s watching habits are transforming, creating opportunities. Many young Arabs have abandoned the Ramadan television series that dominated their parents’ screens for international series streamed on Netflix and Shahid, its Dubai-based Arabic counterpart.

That has created a big market for Arabic-language content.

Netflix has produced Jordanian, Egyptian and Syrian-Lebanese shows, with varying degrees of success, and just announced the release of its first Arabic-language feature film, “Perfect Strangers.”

Syrian and Lebanese studios that used to depend on gulf financiers — who, they complained, often forced them to water down their artistic ambitions by nixing political themes — are also turning to web series and Netflix for new funding and wider audiences.

Saudi Arabia is beginning to feed the streaming services’ appetite, as well. Netflix signed an eight-film deal with Telfaz11, a Saudi creative studio, last year.

The gold-rush atmosphere can be surreal for the Saudi filmmakers who struggled when cinemas at home were banned, film permits were tortuous to secure and the industry was shunned.

Telfaz11 started out on YouTube, where its videos hooked young Saudis looking for a hip alternative to the somnolent broadcast television. Mohammad Makki recalled dodging the police, guerrilla style, to film the first season of his show “Takki,” about a group of Saudi friends navigating Saudi social constraints, a decade ago. Then, it was a low-budget YouTube series. Now, it is a Netflix hit.

“We grew up dying to go to the cinema,” he said, “and now it’s two blocks from my house.”

Saudi women in the industry faced even greater challenges.

When “Wadjda” (2012), the first Saudi feature directed by a woman, was filmed, Haifaa al-Mansour, the director, was barred from mixing in public with male crew members. She worked instead from the back of a van, communicating with the actors via walkie-talkie.

“I’m still in shock,” said Ahd Kamel, who played a conservative teacher in “Wadjda,” which portrays a rebellious young Saudi girl who desperately wants a bicycle, as she walked through the festival. “It’s surreal.”

As a young actress in New York, Ms. Kamel hid her career from her family, knowing they, and Saudi society, would not approve of a woman acting. Now, she said, her family pesters her for festival tickets, and she is preparing to direct a new film to be shot in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi political, religious and cultural sensitivities are still factors, of course.

Marvel’s big-budget “Eternals” was not released in Saudi Arabia — or in Qatar, Kuwait or Egypt — because of gay romantic scenes. Several of the non-Saudi films screened at the Jeddah festival, however, included gay scenes, nudity and an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Hisham Fageeh, a Saudi comedian and actor, said officials had told him future films should avoid touching directly on God or politics.

Sumaya Rida, an actress in the festival movies “Junoon” and “Rupture,” said the films aimed to portray Saudi couples realistically while avoiding onscreen physical affection.

But the filmmakers said they were just happy to have support, accepting that it would come at the price of creative constraints.

“I don’t intend to provoke to provoke. The purpose of cinema is to tease. Cinema doesn’t have to be didactic,” said Fatima al-Banawi, a Saudi actress and director whose first feature film the festival is funding. “It comes naturally. We’ve been so good at working around things for so long.”

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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/us/politics/biden-defense-bill.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=US%20Politics%20News">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/us/politics/biden-defense-bill.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=US%20Politics%20News</a>
GIST	<p>President Biden signed a nearly \$770 billion defense bill on Monday, \$24 billion more than he had requested, a setback for antiwar liberals whose efforts to expand social spending have been blocked by Democratic moderates in the name of fiscal responsibility.</p> <p>Lawmakers increased spending in almost every part of the military, including new funding to counter China's military expansion, initiatives to bolster the defense of Ukraine and billions in cash for the procurement of advanced aircraft, ships and high-tech hardware.</p> <p>The bill, the National Defense Authorization Act, also contains a 2.7 percent pay increase for most service members, a broadly popular provision supported by even the dozens of progressives who opposed the legislation's passage in the House.</p> <p>The measure, which covers the fiscal year that started on Oct. 1, also changes the way the military <a href="#">handles many internal criminal investigations</a>, particularly those involving sexual assault and sexual harassment.</p> <p>Those provisions "are the most transformational thing that has been done by the House Armed Services Committee in my 25 years of service," said Representative Adam Smith, Democrat of Washington and the chairman of the committee. "There's a lot to be proud of in this bill."</p> <p>The measure passed <a href="#">the House</a> and <a href="#">the Senate</a> this month with wide bipartisan support, despite the liberal House members and the 11 senators who voted against it, citing its steep price tag and the stripping away of policy provisions that would have levied penalties against Russia and Saudi Arabia for human rights abuses, required women to register for the draft and cracked down on extremism within the uniformed services.</p> <p>But Republicans did not get everything they wanted. Democrats blocked an effort by House conservatives that would have declared that Congress had "lost confidence" in Mr. Biden over his handling of the withdrawal from Afghanistan.</p> <p>The bill overcame intense partisan and intraparty dysfunction that has plagued Congress this year: The Senate neither passed its own defense bill nor considered any amendments, denying lawmakers the chance to vote on several foreign policy issues.</p> <p>Instead, top congressional officials huddled behind closed doors to cobble together a House bill that could quickly pass both chambers. Those involved in the effort expressed their relief on Monday.</p> <p>Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island and the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, called the bill "a win."</p> <p>"It provides our forces with the resources and support they need to defend our nation," he said in a statement.</p> <p>Mr. Smith and others highlighted the criminal justice reforms as among the most significant in recent history, and predicted that they would do much to change an entrenched culture of cover-ups and favoritism in the military's justice system.</p> <p>The bill, for the first time, criminalizes sexual harassment in the military as an offense under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The changes also mandate that a unit's commander be removed from the decision-making process regarding a range of serious crimes besides sexual assault and harassment, and mandate independent investigations for murder, manslaughter and kidnapping, in an effort to ensure impartiality.</p>

	<p>“These reforms, which are supported by longstanding advocates for survivors of the sexual assault crisis in the military, will take the prosecution of all sex crimes in the military away from the control of the military commander,” Mr. Smith said in a statement.</p> <p>“Instead, qualified, independent, uniformed attorneys — ultimately overseen by the civilian service secretaries — will have the sole authority for charging decisions and the responsibility to prosecute those charges.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Iraq confirms election gains of Shiite cleric</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/world/middleeast/iraq-election-muqtada-al-sadr.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/world/middleeast/iraq-election-muqtada-al-sadr.html</a>
GIST	<p>Iraq’s Federal Supreme Court on Monday upheld the results of the country’s <a href="#">October parliamentary elections</a>, resolving a dispute that had stalled the formation of a new government as Iran-backed Shiite Muslim militias contested gains by a rival Shiite political bloc.</p> <p>The court certified the victory of Muqtada al-Sadr, the influential Shiite cleric who is regarded as a possible ally, if a wary one, for the United States in Iraq. His party won 73 of the 329 seats in Parliament, more than any other and up from 54 in 2018. It handily beat an alliance of Iran-aligned militias led by the Fatah coalition.</p> <p>For Fatah and its allies, Mr. al-Sadr’s victory upset the traditional balance of the Shiite powers that have dominated Iraqi politics since the fall of Saddam Hussein almost 20 years ago and threatened to dent Iranian influence in Parliament. Mr. al-Sadr — an Iraqi nationalist whose forces once battled the Americans but who is now viewed as more hostile to Iran — is poised to play a strong role not only in Parliament but also in choosing the next prime minister.</p> <p>Mr. al-Sadr thanked the court, the election commission and the Iraqi people in a Twitter post on Monday and called for “the formation of a government of national majority that is neither Eastern nor Western.” Earlier he visited the shrine of Imam Ali in the city of Najaf, one of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam, to offer thanks.</p> <p>Fatah filed the lawsuit challenging the results and alleging election fraud after it won 17 seats, little more than a third of its previous total. But on Monday, it accepted the court’s ruling.</p> <p>“We abide by the decision of the Federal Court despite our deep and firm belief that the electoral process was marred by a lot of fraud and manipulation,” said Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of Fatah, citing “concern for Iraq’s security and political stability and our belief in the political process and its democratic path.”</p> <p>Tension had clouded the legal process, delaying the announcement of the ruling, which was originally set for earlier this month. The dispute had raised the possibility that Fatah and its allies would unleash violence to force a result they wanted, and militia members gathered outside the court on Monday morning ahead of the ruling, chanting against the current prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi.</p> <p>But they withdrew by early afternoon, and there were no reports of violence.</p> <p>Mr. al-Kadhimi <a href="#">survived a drone strike</a> on his home early last month after Iraqi security forces clashed with militia members who were protesting the election results outside the Green Zone, where the American embassy is. A deputy commander of one Iran-backed militia was killed.</p> <p>In a speech addressed to the losing political parties on Nov. 18, Mr. al-Sadr warned them against the “ruin of the democratic process in Iraq” and called on them to dissolve their militias and hand over their weapons to the Iraqi national army.</p>

With his huge popular following and powerful militia, which he deployed to entrap American forces in brutal street fighting in the mid-2000s, Mr. al-Sadr was once such an opponent of the Americans in Iraq that the United States ordered him killed. It later decided not to do so.

But Mr. al-Sadr has come to oppose Iranian meddling in Iraq, and he signaled in a speech after the election that foreign embassies were welcome so long as they did not interfere in Iraq's affairs.

Now that the election results have been certified, factions representing Iraq's Kurdish and Sunni Muslim minorities, which have been waiting for the outcome to negotiate or form alliances that could be part of the new government, can plunge into the fray. A majority of Iraqis are Shiite.

Political analysts said they believe the Sadrist won big partly by taking advantage of a new electoral law that limited the traditional power of larger parties and made room for new faces by increasing the number of electoral districts. The Sadrist organization studied the electoral map closely, making sure to field candidates that would not end up running against each other.

But they were not the only beneficiaries: Independent candidates coming out of Iraq's anti-government protest movement, which flooded the streets in late 2019 as Iraqis mobilized against their deeply corrupt and sectarian political system, also won a handful of seats.

Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the United Nations envoy to Iraq, praised the parliamentary elections as "generally peaceful" and well-run.

"Elections and their outcomes can provoke strong feelings," she said. "If such feelings and debates give way to undemocratic impulses — such as disinformation, baseless accusations, intimidation, threats of violence or worse — then sooner or later, the door is opened to acts that are simply intolerable."

Despite the affirmation, the elections, the fifth since Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, saw a [record-low turnout of 41 percent](#) that reflected Iraqis' intense frustration with their leaders.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Greece expands restrictions</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greece-expands-restrictions-contain-omicron-variant-surge-2021-12-27/">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greece-expands-restrictions-contain-omicron-variant-surge-2021-12-27/</a>
GIST	<p>ATHENS, Dec 27 (Reuters) - Greece on Monday announced further restrictions effective from Jan. 3-16 to contain a further upsurge in COVID-19 infections including the Omicron variant, targeting mainly night-time entertainment venues.</p> <p>As confirmed new COVID-19 cases surged to a record of 9,284 on Monday, resulting in 66 deaths, the health minister said that under the new measures, high-protection masks would be compulsory at supermarkets, public transport and eating establishments.</p> <p>Bars and restaurants will have to close at midnight and no standing customers at entertainment venues will be allowed. There will also be a maximum limit of six people per table.</p> <p>"If we find that these measures are not complied with we will ban music (at entertainment venues)," Health Minister Thanos Plevris told a news conference.</p> <p>The government also moved to restrict attendance of sports events to 10% of capacity or an upper limit of 1,000 people.</p> <p>Visitors at care facilities for the elderly will be permitted if they can furnish a negative PCR test taken within the previous 48 hours.</p>

	<p>Authorities had already tightened existing regulations last week, mandating mask wearing in open spaces and banning Christmas and New Year festivities.</p> <p>"We are entering the (period of) prevalence of the Omicron variant in Greece," Plevris said.</p> <p>In the metropolitan Athens area the government plans to ask private sector hospitals to assist the public health system, if necessary, to cope with hospitalisations.</p> <p>Plevris asked those who will be celebrating New Year's Eve to "protect their loved ones" and avoid contact if they expose themselves to public gatherings during the holidays.</p> <p>Greece already had in place restrictions on unvaccinated persons using outdoor or indoor venues. Last week, it ordered double masks or masks offering high protection for persons using public transport or in supermarkets.</p> <p>Health experts believe Omicron is more contagious than earlier strains of the coronavirus, but two studies in the past week suggest those affected were less likely to require hospital treatment.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 Migrants stranded: Belarus-Poland border</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-poland-migration-iraq-c0b56b3f53ef55ee658cc25cc67a0701">https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-poland-migration-iraq-c0b56b3f53ef55ee658cc25cc67a0701</a>
GIST	<p>BRUZGI, Belarus (AP) — On a sunny but freezing morning in a forested area of Belarus at the border with Poland, hundreds of migrants line up to receive hot food and water.</p> <p>They have been stuck here for over a month in the hopes of entering the European Union. Despite several failed attempts to storm the frontier amid the frigid temperatures, many still hope they will be allowed in.</p> <p>"I don't want to stay in Iraq because life there is difficult, even our life is dangerous. Our life there isn't safe, as you see about ISIS and everything else," Iraqi migrant Ahmad Rebaz, 27, told The Associated Press, referring to the Islamic State group. He said his wife had recently given birth to their second child in the nearby Belarusian city of Grodno.</p> <p>Since Nov. 8, a large group of migrants, mostly Iraqi Kurds, has been stranded in Belarus at a border crossing with Poland. Most of the migrants are fleeing conflict or hopelessness at home, and aim to reach Germany or other Western European countries.</p> <p>The EU has accused Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko of waging a "hybrid attack" against the bloc. Officials say he is luring thousands of migrants to Belarus with the promise of help to get to Western Europe to use them as pawns to destabilize the 27-nation EU in retaliation for its sanctions on his authoritarian government. Belarus has denied engineering the crisis.</p> <p>About 600 migrants, according to the Belarusian Red Cross, are living at the Bruzgi logistics center as of late December. It is a warehouse facility where they have set up a makeshift camp, placing mattresses and tents in the rows that once housed shipping containers. Belarusian authorities and the Belarusian Red Cross have provided them with food and other necessary supplies.</p> <p>Poland took a tough stance against the migrants' illegal entry, reinforcing the border and pushing those attempting to get in back into Belarus. The Polish approach was largely met with approval from other EU nations, who want to stop another wave of migration, but has also been criticized by human rights groups.</p> <p>Belarusian authorities have also criticized Poland and other European nations for mistreatment of the migrants, while playing up their own efforts to return them to their home countries and to create decent living conditions for those staying at the border crossing at Bruzgi.</p>

But as temperatures fall below freezing, life at the border becomes more and more challenging. In the heated warehouse, it's still so cold that people inside are keeping their outerwear on.

The migrants "need immediate help because the weather is getting more and more cold," said Zanyar Dlshad, an 18-year-old from Iraq living at the logistics center who hopes to make it to Europe to reunite with his brother and to study at a university.

"It's so cold and I don't believe people can keep up with this," he said.

While most migrants say they want to travel on to Germany, some say they are willing to settle in any country to avoid having to return to Iraq.

"If Belarus, Russia, Poland, Lithuania, or any other country gives us citizenship I'll accept. For me there's no difference. But (I'll) never ever come back to Iraq," said Farhad Mahamad, a 34-year-old migrant from Iraqi Kurdistan.

Several hundred Iraqi migrants have already left Belarus on evacuation flights organized by the Iraqi government, and more are beginning to agree to return home with the help of the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration.

Last Wednesday, about 10 people at the Bruzgi logistics center filed documents to the IOM representatives on site to arrange their return to Iraq.

Mohamed Refaat, senior operations coordinator of the IOM, told the AP that they would be taken to the Belarusian capital, Minsk, by bus before continuing their travel to their home countries.

The site of dramatic clashes between Polish border guards and migrants at the Kuznica-Bruzgi border crossing, in the meantime, is empty of the crowds of people that gathered here last month.

However, some migrants say that they aren't willing to wait at the warehouse much longer and are ready to brave the cold temperatures of what they call "the jungle" — the forested areas at the border — with the hope of finally making it through to Poland.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 CDC investigates 70 cruise ships: infections</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://news.trust.org/item/20211227170451-66k33">https://news.trust.org/item/20211227170451-66k33</a>
GIST	<p>Dec 27 (Reuters) - The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on Monday it was investigating nearly 70 cruise ships after reports of COVID-19 cases on board, as the Omicron variant upended holiday travel over the Christmas weekend.</p> <p>The CDC said COVID-19 cases on 68 ships had met its threshold for an investigation.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Govts assess response to infections surge</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/governments-race-to-ease-staff-shortages-as-omicron-spreads-11640605845">https://www.wsj.com/articles/governments-race-to-ease-staff-shortages-as-omicron-spreads-11640605845</a>
GIST	<p>Government leaders and advisers are assessing how best to respond to a <a href="#">surge of new Covid-19 infections</a> from the fast-spreading <a href="#">Omicron variant</a>, with the U.S. looking at ways to minimize staff shortages and prevent hospitals from becoming overrun with new cases, while Israel has begun testing a fourth shot of Covid-19 vaccine on medical personnel.</p> <p>Initial evidence suggests the Omicron variant, first identified by South African epidemiologists last month, <a href="#">produced a milder disease</a> than earlier Covid-19 strains, particularly in people who have been vaccinated.</p>

But the speed with which it is spreading is presenting a different kind of challenge for policy makers, who are now weighing how to keep critical services functioning amid a wave of staff absences and enforced isolation periods.

The seven-day average of new Covid-19 cases in the U.S. reached 198,405 on Sunday, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of Johns Hopkins University data. Many states haven't reported new infections on some recent days because of the Christmas holidays. Those gaps and subsequent jumps as states bring recent infection data up-to-date [are expected to complicate tracking](#) of the Omicron variant's spread for some time, public-health experts said.

As of Monday, the seven-day average of patients in American hospital beds with confirmed and suspected Covid-19 cases—including the Omicron and Delta variants—was above 71,000, according to the latest data posted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Businesses were adjusting to the challenges caused by rising Covid-19 cases, including for staffing. [Apple](#) Inc. said Monday that it was [temporarily limiting access to almost 20 stores](#) in the New York City area. The stores—closed to shoppers but open to customers picking up online orders—include the company's Fifth Avenue flagship. The move follows Apple's closure of several stores around the country amid increasing infections.

Meanwhile, flight cancellations in the U.S. continued Monday as inclement weather combined with Covid-19-driven airline staff shortages that marred the Christmas weekend for many travelers.

Data tracker FlightAware [reported around 1,100 cancellations](#) by midafternoon compared with more than 1,500 on Sunday, as some problems eased from the weekend.

Anthony Fauci, the Biden administration's top medical adviser, said Monday that U.S. officials should weigh a potential Covid-19 vaccination mandate for domestic air travel. "That is just one of the requirements that I think is reasonable to consider," he said in an interview with MSNBC.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week revised its isolation and quarantine guidelines for healthcare workers who contract the virus—allowing them to go back to work after seven days, instead of 10 days, following a negative test. Other countries, including England, have made similar moves.

President Biden on Monday said his administration [was working to address the testing shortage](#) fueled by Omicron's spread. "Seeing how tough it was for some folks to get a test this weekend shows that we have more work to do," Mr. Biden said during a virtual briefing with governors.

The president last week said his administration would distribute [500 million free at-home Covid-19 testing kits](#) and use the Defense Production Act to boost supply. Mr. Biden reiterated that [Omicron poses the greatest threat](#) to people who are unvaccinated.

"This is not like March 2020—the beginning of the pandemic," he said. "We're prepared and we know what it takes to save lives."

The U.S. Navy said Monday it had docked a destroyer at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii after a significant portion of the crew tested positive for Covid-19. The USS Halsey, which typically has a crew of about 300 officers and enlisted sailors, was the second Navy ship docked in the past week, following the littoral combat ship USS Milwaukee in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. About a quarter of the Milwaukee's fewer than 100 crew members tested positive, a defense official said.

Both crews were 100% vaccinated, the Navy said, but none of the sailors who tested positive had received a booster shot. According to the Navy, 98% of all sailors are vaccinated.

The infected Halsey sailors are being isolated, and the uninfected crew members remain aboard, the Navy said.



Israel's Sheba Medical Center began distributing a fourth vaccine to 150 medical personnel on Monday in a trial that will help the country understand the implications of starting a fourth jab for the elderly and immunosuppressed.

The trial, being carried out in conjunction with the Israeli Health Ministry, is testing a fourth shot on medical workers who had last been vaccinated in August and have low antibody counts.

"This research is very important because we'll have initial data within a few days about the safety," said Dr. Gili Regev-Yochay, director of the infectious-disease epidemiology unit at Sheba Medical Center.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has supported the idea of a fourth vaccine as Omicron cases have risen and overall daily coronavirus cases rose to 1,760 on Sunday. Israel's panel of health experts last week approved of the idea of moving to a fourth vaccine, but the Health Ministry hasn't yet greenlighted the move.

Ran Balicer, head of Israel's national experts advisory committee on Covid-19 response, said Israel might move to authorize a fourth shot before results of the trial are in, pointing out that [Israel was the first country to issue booster shots](#).

"By the time the trial will yield results, things may have already substantially escalated further," he said.

In France on Monday, the government announced plans to lighten its isolation and quarantine guidelines for vaccinated people exposed to the virus in an effort to avoid snarling the economy as the outbreak worsens. French officials also said they would push employees to work remotely at least three days a week in many jobs, and aim to convert the country's health pass into a vaccine pass—meaning a recent negative test would no longer suffice to eat at a restaurant or go to the movies.

In the U.K., British Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) is expected to decide early this week whether further restrictions should be introduced before New Year celebrations in England. The other U.K. countries, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, have already moved to limit public and private gatherings to slow the spread of the virus, but Mr. Johnson is facing pressure from lawmakers from his ruling Conservative Party to avoid making similar moves.

China, meanwhile, is maintaining its zero-Covid policy of eradicating transmission of the virus ahead of the Winter Olympics. The northern city of Xian is now in its fifth day of lockdown after a cluster of cases was found there. Officials reported 150 new symptomatic infections there on Sunday, down slightly from 155 the day before as mass testing continued.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 Expert: January will be 'really hard month'</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/28/us/us-coronavirus-tuesday/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/28/us/us-coronavirus-tuesday/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)The <a href="#">Omicron variant</a> of coronavirus is going to make the start of 2022 difficult, experts say, as new infections surge, healthcare resources are strained and government agencies adapt to face changing conditions.</p> <p>"January is going to be a really, really hard month and people should just brace themselves for a month where lots of people are going to get infected," Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, told CNN's Michael Smerconish Monday.</p> <p>Omicron is spreading rapidly and case numbers are already on the rise. The seven-day average of new daily cases was 237,061 as of Monday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. That's up from an average of 86,203 new daily cases at the beginning of the month.</p>

"I think we're going to see half a million cases a day -- easy -- sometime over the next week to 10 days," CNN medical analyst Dr. Jonathan Reiner told CNN Sunday.

Jha said most people who are vaccinated and boosted won't get severe illness, but that won't be true for the unvaccinated.

"A lot of people who have not gotten a vaccine are going to end up getting pretty sick, and it's going to be pretty disruptive," Jha said. "My hope is, as we get into February and certainly by the time we get into March, infection numbers will come way down, and it'll also start getting spring and the weather will start getting better and that will also help."

Jha said people can protect themselves by getting vaccinated or boosted and taking precautions in public.

"I would urge people to wear a higher quality mask any time they're in a place with lots of people and they're going to be indoors for any extended period of time," Jha said. A surgical mask would be fine for a quick grocery store trip in an empty store, but for other events a good fitting [N95 or KF94 mask](#) provides better protection, he said.

Looking ahead to New Year's Eve Friday, small gatherings of fully vaccinated people will be safe, Dr. Anthony Fauci said. But he advised people to avoid large parties where they don't know the vaccination status of all guests.

"When you are talking about a New Year's Eve party where you have 30, 40, 50 people celebrating, you do not know the status of the vaccination, I would recommend strongly: Stay away from that this year," said Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

"There will be other years to do that. But not this year."

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HEADLINE	12/28 Omicron infection protects against delta?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/safrica-study-suggests-omicron-enhances-neutralizing-immunity-against-delta-2021-12-28/">https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/safrica-study-suggests-omicron-enhances-neutralizing-immunity-against-delta-2021-12-28/</a>
GIST	<p>Dec 28 (Reuters) - Research by South African scientists suggests that Omicron could displace the Delta variant of the coronavirus because infection with the new variant boosts immunity to the older one.</p> <p>The study only covered a small group of people and has not been peer-reviewed, but it found that people who were infected with Omicron, especially those who were vaccinated, developed enhanced immunity to the Delta variant.</p> <p>The analysis enrolled 33 vaccinated and unvaccinated people who were infected with the Omicron variant in South Africa.</p> <p>While the authors found that neutralisation of Omicron increased 14-fold over 14 days after the enrolment, they also found that there was a 4.4-fold increase in neutralisation of the Delta variant.</p> <p>"The increase in Delta variant neutralization in individuals infected with Omicron may result in decreased ability of Delta to re-infect those individuals," the scientists who conducted the study said.</p> <p>The results of the study are "consistent with Omicron displacing the Delta variant, since it can elicit immunity which neutralizes Delta making re-infection with Delta less likely," they said.</p> <p>According to the scientists, implications of this displacement would depend on whether or not Omicron is less pathogenic compared to Delta. "If so, then the incidence of COVID-19 severe disease would be reduced and the infection may shift to become less disruptive to individuals and society."</p>

	<p>Alex Sigal, a professor at the Africa Health Research Institute in South Africa, said on Twitter on Monday that if Omicron was less pathogenic as it looked to be from the South African experience, "this will help push Delta out".</p> <p>According to an earlier South African study, there is reduced risk of hospitalisation and severe disease in people infected with Omicron compared with the Delta variant, though the authors say some of that is likely due to high population immunity.</p> <p>The Omicron variant, first detected in southern Africa and Hong Kong in November, has since spread worldwide and threatened to overwhelm hospitals in some countries.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Omicron spreads gloom NYE celebrations</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/omicron-spreads-global-gloom-years-celebrations-81954355">https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/omicron-spreads-global-gloom-years-celebrations-81954355</a>
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- As omicron spreads ever more gloom around the globe ahead of New Year's Eve, governments are moving at different speeds to contain the scourge, with some reimposing restrictions immediately and others hesitating to spoil the party again.</p> <p>In Britain, where the highly contagious variant of the coronavirus has sent caseloads soaring to record highs, Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Monday no further restrictions will be introduced in England before the new year. New daily infections in England are hovering around 100,000, and hospital admissions were up more than 70% on Christmas from a week earlier.</p> <p>"When we get into the new year, of course, we will see then if we do need to take any further measures, but nothing more until then, at least," Javid said.</p> <p>Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, though, nightclubs have been ordered closed and limits on gatherings imposed in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, leaving the country divided in its approach to the crisis.</p> <p>The Netherlands, meanwhile, has already shut down all nonessential stores, restaurants and bars and extended the school holidays in what largely amounts to a new lockdown. In Belgium, new measures went into effect Monday and over the weekend: Shopping in large groups was banned, and movie theaters and concert halls closed in the middle of the holiday season.</p> <p>In France, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced a set of restrictions set to kick in next week, after New Year's. Among them: Big events will be limited to 2,000 people indoors and 5,000 outdoors; eating and drinking will be banned in theaters, at sports venues and on public transportation; and working from home will be mandatory at least three days a week for employees whose jobs make it possible.</p> <p>Also, a bill will be voted on in France next month to create a vaccine pass that will allow only inoculated people to enter public places, including restaurants, bars and movie theaters.</p> <p>The measures come after France recorded more than 100,000 COVID-19 infections in a single day for the first time in the pandemic.</p> <p>In the U.S., the Biden administration has strongly emphasized the importance of vaccinations, boosters and rapid testing, while New York City's sweeping mandate requiring nearly all businesses, big and small, to bar unvaccinated employees from the workplace took effect Monday. It was announced three weeks ago, soon after omicron gained a foothold in the U.S.</p> <p>The top U.S. infectious-disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, warned that with omicron, "it's going to get worse before it gets better," and he said authorities should seriously consider requiring that domestic airline passengers be vaccinated.</p>

“When you make vaccination a requirement, that’s another incentive to get more people vaccinated,” Fauci told MSNBC.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday cut isolation restrictions for people who have the virus, saying it's in line with the science of when people are most infectious and could also help industries continue to function as cases surge.

“We want to make sure there is a mechanism by which we can safely continue to keep society functioning while following the science,” CDC Director Rochelle Walensky told The Associated Press.

Omicron has forced thousands of flight cancellations and delays around the globe because of staffing shortages linked to the virus, scrambling travelers' holiday plans.

FlightAware, a flight-tracking website, counted more than 2,700 cancellations worldwide by Monday evening in Europe — about 1,100 of them within, into or out of the U.S.

Despite the variant's extraordinary ability to infect people, early indications are that it might cause milder illness than previous versions. That uncertainty is keeping governments guessing and resulting in widely varying strategies for beating back the surge.

In Greece, authorities announced additional restrictions — also effective after New Year's — after recording its highest-ever one-day total of new infections, nearly 9,300.

Health Minister Thanos Plevris said that starting Jan. 3, high-protection or double masks will be mandatory at supermarkets and on public transportation; entertainment venues will close at midnight, and capacity will be cut to 10% at soccer stadiums, among other measures.

Other parts of Europe have likewise hesitated to slap more restrictions on their citizens.

In Poland, a nation of 38 million where the daily death toll now often tops 500, now-closed nightclubs will be allowed to reopen on New Year's Eve, with the government unwilling to go against the will of the many voters opposed to restrictions and mandatory vaccinations.

And despite the highest death toll from COVID-19 in Europe, Russia will ring in the new year with little if any restrictions. Many precautions will be lifted during the holiday period that runs for 10 days starting New Year's Eve. Russia also will not impose any additional travel curbs.

The official Rosstat statistical agency estimated that between April 2020 and October 2021, Russia had 537,000 virus-related deaths.

In Belgium, the move to close theaters and arts centers came in for especially heavy criticism.

"We need it also for our mental health. It is the only way for people to live experiences, to tell stories. It is of paramount importance for us to be open in these complicated and complex times," said Michael De Kok, artistic director of the Flemish Royal Theatre.

Some movie theaters stayed open in an act of civil disobedience.

A major staple of British holiday celebrations, the stream of English Premier League soccer games, is also under threat. The league has called off 15 games over the past 2 1/2 weeks, and more could follow.

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HEADLINE	12/27 Flu in comeback after unusual year off
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/flu-making-comeback-us-unusual-year-off-81961642">https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/flu-making-comeback-us-unusual-year-off-81961642</a>

GIST	<p>The U.S. flu season has arrived on schedule after taking a year off, with flu hospitalizations rising and two child deaths reported.</p> <p>Last year's flu season was the lowest on record, likely because COVID-19 measures — school closures, distancing, masks and canceled travel — prevented the spread of influenza, or because the coronavirus somehow pushed aside other viruses.</p> <p>“This is setting itself up to be more of a normal flu season,” said Lynnette Brammer, who tracks flu-like illnesses for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>The childhood deaths, Brammer said, are “unfortunately what we would expect when flu activity picks up. It's a sad reminder of how severe flu can be.”</p> <p>During last year's unusually light flu season, one child died. In contrast, 199 children died from flu two years ago, and 144 the year before that.</p> <p>In the newest data, the most intense flu activity was in the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., and the number of states with high flu activity rose from three to seven. In CDC figures released Monday, states with high flu activity are New Mexico, Kansas, Indiana, New Jersey, Tennessee, Georgia and North Dakota.</p> <p>The type of virus circulating this year tends to cause the largest amount of severe disease, especially in the elderly and the very young, Brammer said.</p> <p>Last year's break from the flu made it more challenging to plan for this year's flu vaccine. So far, it looks like what's circulating is in a slightly different subgroup from what the vaccine targets, but it's “really too early to know” whether that will blunt the vaccine's effectiveness, Brammer said.</p> <p>“We’ll have to see what the impact of these little changes” will be, Brammer said. “Flu vaccine is your best way to protect yourself against flu.”</p> <p>There are early signs that fewer people are getting flu shots compared with last year. With hospitals already stretched by COVID-19, it's more important than ever to get a flu shot and take other precautions, Brammer said.</p> <p>“Cover your cough. Wash your hands. Stay home if you’re sick,” Brammer said. “If you do get flu, there are antivirals you can talk to your doctor about that can prevent severe illness and help you stay out of the hospital.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Nicaragua seizes former Taiwan embassy</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/nicaragua-seizes-taiwan-embassy-give-china-81957025">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/nicaragua-seizes-taiwan-embassy-give-china-81957025</a>
GIST	<p>MANAGUA, Nicaragua -- The Nicaraguan government has seized the former embassy and diplomatic offices of Taiwan, saying they belong to China.</p> <p>President Daniel Ortega’s government broke off relations with Taiwan this month, saying it would recognize only the mainland government.</p> <p>Before departing, Taiwanese diplomats attempted to donate the properties to the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Managua.</p> <p>But Ortega's government said late Sunday that any such donation would be invalid and that the building in an upscale Managua neighborhood belongs to China.</p>

The Attorney General's Office said in a statement that the attempted donation was a "manuever and subterfuge to take what doesn't belong to them."

Taiwan's Foreign Relations Ministry condemned the "gravely illegal actions of the Ortega regime," saying the Nicaraguan government had violated standard procedures by giving Taiwanese diplomats just two weeks to get out of the country.

It said Taiwan "also condemns the arbitrary obstruction by the Nicaraguan government of the symbolic sale of its property to the Nicaraguan Catholic church."

Msgr. Carlos Avilés, vicar of the archdiocese of Managua, told the La Prensa newspaper that a Taiwanese diplomat had offered the church the property, saying, "I told him there was no problem, but the transfer was still in the legal process."

The Central American country said in early December it would officially recognize only China, which claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory.

"There is only one China," the Nicaraguan government said in a statement announcing the change. "The People's Republic of China is the only legitimate government that represents all China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of the Chinese territory."

The move increased Taiwan's diplomatic isolation on the international stage, even as the island has stepped up official exchanges with countries such as Lithuania and Slovakia, which do not formally recognize Taiwan as a country. Now, Taiwan has 14 formal diplomatic allies remaining.

China has been poaching Taiwan's diplomatic allies over the past few years, reducing the number of countries that recognize the democratic island as a sovereign nation. China is against Taiwan representing itself in global forums or in diplomacy. The Solomon Islands chose to recognize China in 2019, cutting diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Taiwan depicts itself as a defender of democracy, while Ortega was reelected in November in what the White House called a "pantomime election."

"The arbitrary imprisonment of nearly 40 opposition figures since May, including seven potential presidential candidates, and the blocking of political parties from participation rigged the outcome well before election day," U.S. President Joe Biden said in a statement in November.

Nicaragua established diplomatic relations with Taiwan in the 1990s, when President Violeta Chamorro assumed power after defeating Ortega's Sandinista movement at the polls. Ortega, who was elected back to power in 2007, had maintained ties with Taipei until now.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Ethiopia decries US ends duty free access</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ethiopia-unhappy-us-ends-duty-free-access-81957477">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ethiopia-unhappy-us-ends-duty-free-access-81957477</a>
GIST	<p>NAIROBI, Kenya -- Ethiopia says it is unhappy with the U.S. decision to revoke duty-free access for the East African country's exports.</p> <p>The statement by Ethiopia's trade ministry on Monday came after the Biden administration on Dec. 23 terminated Ethiopia's eligibility for benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act. The U.S cited its disapproval of the war in the Tigray region for the action.</p> <p>"The Ethiopian government is saddened over the decision by the U.S. to remove it," from the preferential trade benefits, the ministry said. It asked the U.S. to reconsider its decision.</p>



“Ethiopia is carrying out various initiatives aimed at bringing peace and stability, political consensus and economic development in addition to conducting reforms in line with the longstanding relationship between the two countries,” the statement said.

The U.S. stopped Ethiopia’s eligibility for the trade benefits despite pleas by a few U.S. legislators and Ethiopian lobby groups who asked the Biden administration to give the country more time to comply with U.S. demands.

The decision against the African nation was made over its failure to end a nearly yearlong war in the Tigray region that has led to “gross violations” of human rights, said the Biden statement. The action also stops Guinea and Mali from receiving the trade benefits as of January 1.

The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act provides sub-Saharan African nations duty-free access to the United States on the condition they meet certain requirements, including eliminating barriers to U.S. trade and investment and making progress toward political pluralism.

The U.S. and the United Nations say Ethiopian authorities have prevented trucks from delivering desperately needed food and other aid into Tigray. Scores of people have starved to death, The Associated Press has reported.

In September Biden warned that his administration would levy sanctions if Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed did not take steps to wind down the war in Tigray and other regions.

On November 3, Ethiopia’s foreign ministry labeled the move as “misguided” and “unjustified intimidation” and said the decision could affect the livelihoods of more than 200,000 low-income Ethiopians who work for companies that benefit from the preferential trade access.

Some Ethiopian companies are already showing signs of a downturn in their export business.

“Several companies have already started leaving and we don’t know what is next,” a textile worker at the Hawassa Industrial Park, some 270 kilometers (168 miles) south of the capital, Addis Ababa, told the AP by phone on condition of anonymity fearing for his workplace safety.

Ethiopia in recent years had one of Africa’s fastest-growing economies, but the war in Tigray has dampened that momentum.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Snow blasts Calif; freezes Pacific Northwest</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/snow-blasts-california-freezes-pacific-northwest-81958014">https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/snow-blasts-california-freezes-pacific-northwest-81958014</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE -- Severe weather sweeping parts of the U.S. brought frigid temperatures to the Pacific Northwest, heavy snow to mountains in Northern California and Nevada and unseasonable warmth to Texas and the Southeast.</p> <p>Emergency warming shelters were opened throughout Oregon and western Washington as temperatures plunged into the teens and forecasters said an arctic blast would last for several days. Sunday’s snow showers blew into the Pacific Northwest from the Gulf of Alaska, dumping up to 6 inches (15 centimeters) across the Seattle area.</p> <p>The National Weather Service said Seattle’s low Sunday was 20 degrees F (-6.7 C), breaking a mark set in 1948. Bellingham was 9 degrees F (-12. 8C), three degrees colder than the previous record set in 1971.</p> <p>State officials in Oregon have declared an emergency. In Multnomah County – home to Portland — about a half dozen weather shelters were open. Seattle city leaders also opened at least six severe weather shelters starting Saturday through at least Wednesday.</p>

In West Seattle, Keith Hughes of the American Legion Hall Post 160, said his warming center can welcome about a dozen people — its capacity limited by lack of volunteer staff.

“Volunteers, this is a problem for myself as well as everyone else in town, it’s really hard to get with COVID going on,” he said.

Winter weather led to canceled flights in Seattle, Minneapolis, Salt Lake City and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, blowing snow in mountains of Northern California and Nevada closed key highways, with forecasters warning that travel in the Sierra Nevada could be difficult for several days.

At Donner Pass in the Sierra, officials with the University of California, Berkeley’s Central Sierra Snow Laboratory on Monday said recent snowfall has smashed the snowiest December record of 179 inches (4.6 meters), set in 1970. The record is now 193.7 inches (4.9 meters) as more snow is expected.

The Northstar California Resort in Truckee closed its mountain operations on Monday amid blizzard conditions. The ski resort has received more than 6 feet (1.8 meters) of snow over the last 48 hours, according to the resort's Facebook post.

Search and rescue crews are looking for a missing skier who was last seen Saturday morning on a lift at the ski resort, KCRA reported.

The snowpack in the Sierra was at dangerously low levels after recent weeks of dry weather but the state Department of Water Resources reported on Monday that the snowpack was between 145% and 161% of normal across the range with more snow expected.

In Nevada, freezing air and blinding snow blasted across the northern part of the state on Monday, affecting travel and business, closing Sierra Nevada highway passes, delaying airport flights and shutting state offices.

Interstate 80 remained closed due to poor visibility and heavy snow from the Nevada state line to Placer County, California. An avalanche blocked a state route that connects Tahoe City to some ski resorts in Olympic Valley and authorities urged motorists to avoid nonessential travel.

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak ordered nonessential state workers other than public safety and corrections personnel to remain home due to the storm.

Weather and travel advisories stretched to northeast Nevada and Elko due to the possibility of blowing and drifting snow.

The storms that have been pummeling California and Nevada in recent days also brought rain and snow to Arizona. A record inch of rain in one day was reported at the airport in Phoenix Friday when 11 inches (28 centimeters) of snow fell at the Arizona Snowbowl ski resort just outside Flagstaff. Another 6 inches (15 centimeters) of snow were recorded in the 24 hours ending Monday morning.

More storms are expected to hit the desert state starting Monday afternoon and continuing throughout the week.

Temperatures were unseasonably warm in parts of the Southern Plains, including in Arkansas, where several cities broke records on Christmas Day for daily high temperatures.

But forecasters warned that severe storms were possible midweek when a storm system moves through the Deep South, with Alabama and Mississippi at greatest risk for bad weather, according to the Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma.

Heavy snow will start winding down by Monday evening in California's Sierra Nevada and the area is expected to get a break from the cold snap by Thursday, said Emily Heller, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

Temperatures in western Washington and Oregon aren't forecast to rise above freezing until at least Thursday, and possibly not until the weekend, forecasters said.

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## Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/27 Phishing toolkits in the wild intercept 2FA
SOURCE	<a href="https://therecord.media/more-than-1200-phishing-toolkits-capable-of-intercepting-2fa-detected-in-the-wild/">https://therecord.media/more-than-1200-phishing-toolkits-capable-of-intercepting-2fa-detected-in-the-wild/</a>
GIST	<p>A team of academics said it found more than 1,200 phishing toolkits deployed in the wild that are capable of intercepting and allowing cybercriminals to bypass two-factor authentication (2FA) security codes.</p> <p>Also known as <b>MitM (Man-in-the-Middle) phishing toolkits</b>, these tools have become extremely popular in the cybercrime underworld in recent years after major tech companies started making 2FA a default security feature for their users.</p> <p>The direct result was that threat actors who managed to trick a user into entering credentials on a phishing site found that the stolen credentials became useless since they couldn't bypass the 2FA procedure.</p> <p>To counter this new trend in account security protections, since at least 2017, threat actors started adopting new tools that would allow them to bypass 2FA by stealing a user's authentication cookies, which are files created inside a web browser once the user has logged into an account after the 2FA process was completed.</p> <p>In most instances, cybercrime groups have relied on a malware category known as an "infostealer" to steal these authentication cookie files from computers they managed to infect.</p> <p>However, there is another way to steal these files that does not rely on infecting a computer with malware—namely, by stealing the authentication cookies while they transit the internet from the service provider to a user's computer.</p> <p><b>Explained: Real-time phishing -vs- MitM phishing</b></p> <p>For the past few years, cybercriminals have been slowly adapting their old phishing toolkits to go around 2FA procedures, primarily by using two techniques.</p> <p>The first one is known as "<b>real-time phishing</b>"<a href="#">[1, 2]</a> and relies on an operator sitting in front of a web panel while a user is navigating and interacting with a phishing site.</p> <p>The idea is that once a user enters their credentials on the phishing site, the operator uses these credentials to authenticate themselves on the real site.</p> <p>When the attacker is presented with a 2FA challenge, the threat actor simply pushes a button that prompts the user for the actual 2FA code (received via email, SMS, or authenticator app) and then collects and enters the 2FA token on the real site, creating a legitimate connection between their (attacker) system and the victim's account.</p> <p>Typically, real-time phishing tools are used for breaking into web banking portals, where user login sessions don't stay active longer than a few minutes, and every re-authentication request needs another 2FA code.</p>

Attackers that use real-time phishing don't bother collecting authentication cookies—since these have a short life—and typically steal user funds from an account right away, burning their access.

However, mundane services like email providers, social media accounts, gaming services, and others have more relaxed rules around user login sessions, and they create authentication cookies that sometimes are valid for years.

Once obtained, these files can grant the attackers a more stable and undetectable way of accessing an account, even without the owner's knowledge.

This is where MitM phishing toolkits have proven to be useful for some threat actors who don't want to dabble with distributing infostealer malware.

Instead, they use phishing kits adapted to work as [reverse proxies](#), which relay traffic between the victim (1), the phishing site (2), and the legitimate service (3).

Users who authenticate on a MitM phishing site are actually logged into a legitimate site, but since all the traffic goes through the reverse proxy system, the attacker also has a copy of the authentication cookie, which he can then abuse or resell on underground markets dedicated to the trade of authentication cookies [1, 2].

In a way, MitM phishing toolkits are real-time phishing toolkits but without the need of a human operator since everything is automated through the reverse proxy.

Ironically, today, many of these MitM phishing toolkits are based on tools developed by security researchers, such as [Evilginx](#), [Muraena](#), and [Modlishka](#).

### **MitM phishing toolkits are gaining in popularity**

In a study published last month, academics from Stony Brook University and security firm Palo Alto Networks said they analyzed 13 versions of these three MitM phishing toolkits and created fingerprints for the web traffic that goes through one of these tools.

They used their findings to develop a tool called [PHOCA](#) that could detect if a phishing site was using a reverse proxy—a clear sign that the attacker was trying to bypass 2FA and collect authentication cookies rather than credentials alone.

The researchers said they fed PHOCA with URLs reported by the cybersecurity community as phishing sites between March 2020 and March 2021 and found that 1,220 of these sites were using MitM phishing toolkits.

The number is a significant jump from the roughly 200 phishing sites running reverse proxies that were active in late 2018 and early 2019, according to stats provided at the time to this reporter by late RiskIQ researcher [Yonathan Klijnsma](#).

This rise shows that these tools, and MitM phishing kits in general, have slowly gained in popularity among the cybercrime ecosystem.

A reason why they did can also be linked to the fact that most are free to download, easy to run, and there are plenty of tutorials and collaboration requests on hacking forums that have helped threat actors get acquainted with this new technology.

With 2FA seeing a broader adoption among online services, currently, all signs point to the fact that most phishing operations will eventually evolve to include MitM capabilities into their standard features sometime in the near future. They have no reason not to, and this is why this research was carried out in the first place.

	<p>For more information on this study, the researchers presented their findings last month at the ACM CCS 2021 security conference.</p> <p>The video of their presentation is below and a copy of their report, titled “<b>Catching Transparent Phish: Analyzing and Detecting MITM Phishing Toolkits</b>,” is also available for download as a <a href="#">PDF</a>.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Malware in downloads of Spiderman movie</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/spider-man-no-way-home-pirated.html">https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/spider-man-no-way-home-pirated.html</a>
GIST	<p>Peter Parker might not be a mastermind cryptocurrency criminal, but the name Spiderman is quickly becoming more associated with the mining landscape. <a href="#">ReasonLabs</a>, a leading provider of cybersecurity prevention and detection software, recently discovered a new form of malware hacking into customer computers in the guise of the latest Spiderman movie.</p> <p>As perhaps the most <a href="#">talked-about movie for some time</a>, Spiderman: No Way Home represents an excellent opportunity for hackers. It's a chance to connect with millions of potential targets, and hack into computers all around the globe. All today's malicious actors need to do is promise their victims access to the latest movie, and they get an all-access pass to their PC.</p> <p>The cryptocurrency mining malware discovered by ReasonLabs disguises itself as a torrent for the Spiderman: No Way Home movie, encouraging viewers around the world to download the file, and open the computer to criminals.</p> <p><b>Using a Mask: Tricking Users into Downloading Malware</b></p> <p>Cybersecurity issues are on the rise in today's digital world. There were around 714 million attempted ransomware attacks reported for 2021 – a <a href="#">134% rise from 2020</a>. As people spend more of their time online, both for work and entertainment, criminals are discovering new opportunities to pinpoint easy targets. One of the easiest ways for criminals to find their victims – is with the right lure.</p> <p>With many viewers still unable to attend physical cinemas due to lockdown restrictions, fans of the Spiderman franchise have been keen to get their hands on the movie elsewhere. This might be why so many people chose to download the "leaked" file, identified as: spiderman_net_putidomoi.torrent.exe, when it first emerged.</p> <p>According to ReasonLabs, however, this is far from the first-time criminals have tried to trick users by convincing them they're downloading something they want.</p> <p>While most people are aware of the threats associated with unknown files, criminals are excellent at making their downloads look legitimate. This specific cryptocurrency mining malware may have been around in a number of different disguises before donning the Spiderman outfit. ReasonLabs believes it has also been circulating as apps like Discord or Windows Updater.</p> <p><b>What Does the Spiderman Malware Do?</b></p> <p>The malware baked into the Spiderman: No Way Home torrent is not listed by <a href="#">VirusTotal</a> at this time, but ReasonLabs believes it has been around for quite some time, affecting numerous users.</p> <p>ReasonLabs noted they frequently see miners deploying in the disguise of common programs and files. Crypto-mining tools hidden in the files has grown increasingly popular in recent years, because they offer easy access to cash. Hiding a crypto miner in a file sure to attract a lot of attention, like a Spiderman movie, makes it easy to target as many victims as possible.</p> <p>When a user downloads the file, the code adds exclusions to Windows Defender to stop you from tracking its actions, spawns watchdogs for protection and creates persistence. The overall purpose of the malware is</p>

to mine a kind of cryptocurrency called Monero (XMR) – one of the more untraceable and anonymous cryptocurrencies used frequently in the dark web.

Users afflicted by the malware may not immediately notice any change to their computer. However, as the technology draws on your CPU power, you may begin to see a reduction in speed, and problems with your overall computer functionality. Additionally, the damage is likely to eventually show up in the electricity bill too, as devices need to draw extra power for mining.

### Even Spiderman Isn't Safe

As consumers continue to spend more of their time online, malicious individuals are actively looking for new and improved ways to trick their users into downloading suspicious files. The Spiderman torrent malware is just one excellent example of this.

ReasonLabs found the malware during a routine search of the files in their substantial database. The company has collected a lot of malware data over the years, and routinely checks any files that may be identified as suspicious. After one of ReasonLabs' users downloaded the Spiderman file, it was immediately flagged as suspicious and marked for investigation.

Currently, ReasonLabs are still in the process of actively researching where this malware came from and hope to provide some additional insights soon. In the meantime, be cautious about which spiders you trust.

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HEADLINE	12/28 'DoubleFeature' diagnostic logging tool
SOURCE	<a href="https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/experts-detail-logging-tool-of.html">https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/experts-detail-logging-tool-of.html</a>
GIST	<p>Cybersecurity researchers have offered a detailed glimpse into a system called DoubleFeature that's dedicated to logging the different stages of post-exploitation stemming from the deployment of DanderSpritz, a full-featured malware framework used by the <a href="#">Equation Group</a>.</p> <p>DanderSpritz came to light on April 14, 2017, when a hacking group known as the Shadow Brokers leaked the exploit tool, among others, under a dispatch titled "<a href="#">Lost in Translation</a>." Also included in the leaks was <a href="#">EternalBlue</a>, a cyberattack exploit developed by the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) that enabled threat actors to carry out the <a href="#">NotPetya ransomware attack</a> on unpatched Windows computers.</p> <p>The tool is a modular, stealthy, and fully functional framework that relies on dozens of plugins for post-exploitation activities on Windows and Linux hosts. DoubleFeature is one among them, which functions as a "diagnostic tool for victim machines carrying DanderSpritz," researchers from Check Point <a href="#">said</a> in a new report published Monday.</p> <p>"DoubleFeature could be used as a sort of Rosetta Stone for better understanding DanderSpritz modules, and systems compromised by them," the Israeli cybersecurity firm added. "It's an incident response team's pipe dream."</p> <p>Designed to maintain a log of the types of tools that could be deployed on a target machine, DoubleFeature is a Python-based dashboard that also doubles up as a reporting utility to exfiltrate the logging information from the infected machine to an attacker-controlled server. The output is interpreted using a specialized executable named "DoubleFeatureReader.exe."</p> <p>Some of the plugins monitored by DoubleFeature include remote access tools called UnitedRake (aka <a href="#">EquationDrug</a>) and PeddleCheap, a stealthy data exfiltration backdoor dubbed StraitBizarre, an espionage platform called KillSuit (aka GrayFish), a persistence toolset named DiveBar, a covert network access driver called FlewAvenue, and a validator implant named MistyVeal that verifies if the compromised system is indeed an authentic victim machine and not a research environment.</p> <p>"Sometimes, the world of high-tier APT tools and the world of ordinary malware can seem like two parallel universes," the researchers said. "Nation-state actors tend to [maintain] clandestine, gigantic</p>



	codebases, sporting a huge gamut of features that have been cultivated over decades due to practical need. It turns out we too are still slowly chewing on the 4-year-old leak that revealed DanderSpritz to us, and gaining new insights."
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Internet scans vulnerable Log4j systems dip</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/application-security/internet-scans-for-log4j-vulnerability-dip-40-for-christmas-but-may-recover-soon">https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/application-security/internet-scans-for-log4j-vulnerability-dip-40-for-christmas-but-may-recover-soon</a>
GIST	<p>Internet scanning for vulnerable Log4j systems dipped nearly 40% since the day before Christmas, hitting its lowest levels in more than two weeks.</p> <p>According to data from Sean Gallagher, a threat analyst at Sophos, scanning jumped nearly 40% between Dec. 12 and Dec. 13 and remained at least 30% higher than that December 12 baseline every day except one between Dec. 13 and Dec. 24. On Dec. 25, it dropped to 15% higher than baseline, and the next day it dropped marginally below the Dec. 12 baseline. Scanning continued to drop the day after that.</p> <p>Apache released the latest patch for Log4j, a ubiquitous logging library, on Dec. 13.</p> <p>"We typically see a decrease in malicious activity as we get closer to Orthodox Christmas and New Year," said Gallagher. "Scammers and hackers have lives too."</p> <p>Orthodox Christmas takes place on Jan. 7 and is the Christmas date widely celebrated in Russia.</p> <p>Scammers lives are probably the reason for the dipping to around 14% above baseline on Dec. 19, said Gallagher. Dec. 19 was a Sunday.</p> <p>There are two peaks in Gallagher's data he said may reflect the change-over from an initial wave of global data collection to hackers adopting the vulnerability.</p> <p>"We think a lot of the initial traffic was simply people scanning to see what the vulnerable system population was," he said.</p> <p>Now in its third week causing a global information security panic, the Log4j vulnerability punches a hole in one of Java's most common library. Experts assume despite frantic efforts to remediate, <a href="#">clean up could take months or years</a>.</p> <p>Dipping malicious activity around holidays, nights and weekends is common phenomena for criminals and nation-states across the board. In 2018, a researcher with Akamai <a href="#">told Axios</a> that you could tell when World Cup games started by a dip in attacks and when the scores got out of hand when attacks rose again.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 QNAP NAS devices hit in surge of attacks</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/qnap-nas-devices-hit-in-surge-of-ech0raix-ransomware-attacks/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/qnap-nas-devices-hit-in-surge-of-ech0raix-ransomware-attacks/</a>
GIST	<p>Users of QNAP network-attached storage (NAS) devices are reporting attacks on their systems with the eCh0raix ransomware, also known as QNAPCrypt.</p> <p>The threat actor behind this particular malware intensified their activity about a week before Christmas, taking control of the devices with administrator privileges.</p> <p><b>Attack count jumps before Christmas</b></p> <p>BleepingComputer forum users managing QNAP and Synology NAS systems have been regularly reporting eCh0raix ransomware attacks but more of them started to <a href="#">disclose incidents</a> around December 20.</p>

The jump in the number of attacks is confirmed by the [ID ransomware service](#), where submissions started to increase on December 19 and subsided towards December 26.

The initial infection vector remains unclear at the moment. Some users admit they were reckless and did not secure the device properly (e.g. [expose it to the internet](#) over an insecure connection); others claim a vulnerability in QNAP's Photo Station allowed the attackers to wreak havoc.

*Yes I know I am a total idiot for leaving that open to this type of hack but I didnt take any of that seriously. I always thought no-one want the little guy and I will be the first to say I was wrong!*

Regardless of the attack path, it appears that the eCh0raix ransomware actor creates a user in the administrator group, which allows them to encrypt all files on the NAS system.

QNAP users - some of them using the NAS device for business purposes - reported on the BleepingComputer forum that the malware encrypted pictures and documents.

Apart from the spike in the number of attacks, what stands out in this campaign is that the actor mistyped the extension for the ransom note and used the ".TXTT" extension.

While this does not prevent viewing the instructions, it may create a problem for some users, who will have to point the operating system to open the file with a specific program (e.g. Notepad) or load it in said program.

BleepingComputer has seen ech0raix ransomware demands ranging from .024 (\$1,200) to .06 bitcoins (\$3,000) during these recent attacks.. Some users had no backup options and had to pay the threat actor to recover their files.

It is important to note that there is a free decryptor for files locked with an older version (before July 17th, 2019) of eCh0raix ransomware. However, there is no free solution to decrypt data locked by the latest variants of the malware (versions 1.0.5 and 1.0.6).

Attacks with eCh0raix/QNAPCrypt [started in June 2019](#) and have been a constant threat ever since. QNAP earlier this year alerted its users of another [flurry of eCh0raix attacks](#) earlier this year, targeting devices with weak passwords.

Users should follow [QNAP's recommendations](#) to ensure proper protection of their NAS devices and the data they store.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Shutterfly suffers Conti ransomware attack</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/shutterfly-services-disrupted-by-conti-ransomware-attack/?&amp;web_view=true">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/shutterfly-services-disrupted-by-conti-ransomware-attack/?&amp;web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>Photography and personalized photo giant Shutterfly has suffered a Conti ransomware attack that allegedly encrypted thousands of devices and stole corporate data.</p> <p>Although many associate Shutterfly with their website, the company's photography-related services are aimed at consumer, enterprise, and education customers through various brands such as GrooveBook, BorrowLenses, <a href="#">Shutterfly.com</a>, Snapfish, and Lifetouch.</p> <p>The main website can be used to upload photos to create photo books, personalized stationary, greeting cards, post cards, and more.</p> <p><b>Shutterfly suffers a Conti ransomware attack</b></p>

On Friday, a source told BleepingComputer that Shutterfly suffered a ransomware attack approximately two weeks ago by the Conti gang, who claims to have encrypted over 4,000 devices and 120 VMware ESXi servers.

While BleepingComputer has not seen the negotiations for the attack, we are told that they are underway **in progress** and that the ransomware gang is demanding millions of dollars as a ransom.

Before ransomware gangs encrypt devices on corporate networks, they commonly lurk inside for days, if not weeks, stealing corporate data and documents. These documents are then used as leverage to force a victim to pay a ransom under the threat that they will be publicly released or sold to other hackers.

Conti has created a private Shutterfly data leak page containing screenshots of files allegedly stolen during the ransomware attack, as part of this "double-extortion" tactic. The attackers threaten to make this page public if a ransom is not paid.

#### **Private data leak page on Conti dark web site**

BleepingComputer has been told that these screenshots include legal agreements, bank and merchant account info, login credentials for corporate services, spreadsheets, and what appears to be customer information, including the last four digits of credit cards.

Conti also claims to have the source code for Shutterfly's store, but it is unclear if the ransomware gang means Shutterfly.com or another website.

After contacting Shutterfly on Friday about the attack, BleepingComputer was sent a statement confirming the ransomware attack late Sunday night.

This statement, shown in its entirety below, says that the [Shutterfly.com](https://www.shutterfly.com), Snapfish, TinyPrints, or Spoonflower sites were not affected by the attack. However, their corporate network, Lifetouch, BorrowLenses, and Groovebook had disrupted services.

*"Shutterfly, LLC recently experienced a ransomware attack on parts of our network. This incident has not impacted our Shutterfly.com, Snapfish, TinyPrints or Spoonflower sites. However, portions of our Lifetouch and BorrowLenses business, Groovebook, manufacturing and some corporate systems have been experiencing interruptions. We engaged third-party cybersecurity experts, informed law enforcement, and have been working around the clock to address the incident."*

*"As part of our ongoing investigation, we are also assessing the full scope of any data that may have been affected. We do not store credit card, financial account information or the Social Security numbers of our Shutterfly.com, Snapfish, Lifetouch, TinyPrints, BorrowLenses, or Spoonflower customers, and so none of that information was impacted in this incident. However, understanding the nature of the data that may have been affected is a key priority and that investigation is ongoing. We will continue to provide updates as appropriate." - Shutterfly.*

While Shutterfly states that no financial information was disclosed, BleepingComputer was told that one of the screenshots contains the last four digits of credit cards, so it is unclear if there is further, and more concerning, information stolen during the attack.

When BleepingComputer reached out to Shutterfly about the screenshot they referred us back to the original statement.

#### **The Conti ransomware gang**

[Conti](#) is a ransomware operation believed to be operated by a Russian hacking group known for other notorious malware infections, such as Ryuk, TrickBot, and BazarLoader.

	<p>This operation runs as a Ransomware-as-a-Service, where the core team develops the ransomware, maintains payment and data leak sites, and negotiates with victims. They then recruit "affiliates" who breach the corporate network, steal data, and encrypt devices.</p> <p>As part of this arrangement, ransom payments are split between the core group and the affiliate, with the affiliate usually receiving 70-80% of the total amount.</p> <p>Conti commonly breaches a network after a corporate device becomes infected with the <a href="#">BazarLoader or TrickBot malware infections</a>, which provide remote access to the hacking group.</p> <p>Once they gain access to an internal system, they spread through the network, harvest data, and deploy the ransomware.</p> <p>Conti is known for attacks on other high-profile organizations in the past, including Ireland's <a href="#">Health Service Executive (HSE)</a> and <a href="#">Department of Health (DoH)</a>, the <a href="#">City of Tulsa</a>, <a href="#">Broward County Public Schools</a>, and <a href="#">Advantech</a>.</p> <p>Due to the increased activity by the cybercrime gang, the US government recently issued an <a href="#">advisory on Conti ransomware attacks</a>.</p> <p><i>Update 12/27/21: Updated with response about financial information in stolen data.</i></p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 'Festive fraud' during the holiday season</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2021/12/27/festive-fraud/?web_view=true">https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2021/12/27/festive-fraud/?web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>Last year, <a href="#">1 in 4 people fell victim to fraud</a> during the holiday season. And according to Signifyd's latest <a href="#">Fraud Pressure Index</a>, which charts the percentage of high-risk transactions over the company's commerce network, fraud is hitting an all-time high.</p> <p>Fraud peaks during the year-end holidays. Scammers know that consumers, rushing around and looking for bargains, are prone to let their guards down a bit more than usual this time of year. To prepare for this spike in fraud, businesses – especially those in the retail space – should look to <a href="#">increase their own security measures</a>. Investing in robust data protection and being clear about security protocols will give customers peace of mind that their personal data is secure, keeping their wallets safe this holiday season.</p> <p>Consumers have a large role to play in data protection too. To protect themselves from festive fraud, they need to look at their buying patterns and anticipate the tactics that perpetrators of fraud might take. The first step is to know how to spot a scam when you see one. This isn't always easy – fraudsters get smarter every year, and they've developed tactics to target consumers with season-specific content designed to look as real and appealing as possible.</p> <p><b>Five scams you are likely to see</b></p> <p><b>Fake delivery notifications:</b> Deliveries have skyrocketed since the pandemic. A common ploy is to send a fake delivery notice in the hopes that a consumer is waiting for a package to come. The fraudulent message may look like it's coming from a major shipper like Amazon or UPS, but it's really a guise for malware seeking out your personal information. A fake shipping link may redirect to a counterfeit page soliciting a credit card number or personal information. Check each delivery notification closely and use the retailer's confirmed resources to track your packages on your own.</p> <p><b>Fake shopping sites and sellers:</b> Supply chain shortages this holiday season promise to exacerbate the growing issue of fake retailer scams. Fraudsters are taking advantage of shortages to lure desperate gift givers into a trap. They set up fake retail websites that look like real online sites with sophisticated layouts and branding. Once the order is made, sometimes the perpetrator will send a knock-off item; other times you won't get anything at all. One giveaway that your merchant is a fraudster is that scammers will often</p>

ask you to pay with a money order or wire transfer. Holiday shopping is no time to take chances on new, untested sites.

**Fake gift cards and vouchers:** Other ploys include asking a customer to pay in gift cards or sending a gift card, voucher or coupon and soliciting a small fee to activate it. Gift card payment offers are popular with scammers because cards are easy for people to buy and have fewer protections than other payment options. They operate like cash: Once they're used, the money on the card is gone. Scammers often entice people with phone pitches, pushing them to act quickly to take advantage of a limited time offer. The caller often stays on the phone while you go to the store and load money onto the card. This is always a scam. No legitimate retailer would engage in this method of payment.

**Fake charities:** When the general population is thinking about giving, cyber scammers are focusing on taking. They will use any means possible, including posing as a charity, to take advantage of your good nature and extract your hard-earned cash from your pocket. The fact that one third of all charitable giving is done in December gives scammers an opening to pitch people eager to make a positive holiday gesture.

**Fake travel offers:** This time of year traditionally generates big increases in travel bookings with people anxious to get home for the holidays or head someplace warm on vacation. Scammers seize on this trend by creating irresistible – but fake – travel offers. The Better Business Bureau regularly puts out warnings of holiday travel scams. People may think they are receiving a holiday “deal” offering low-cost flights, rental cars, and lodging. While the travel industry does amp up its marketing over the holidays, the BBB notes that deals that appear too good to be true often aren't true at all. Often, they're scams.

### **Ways to avoid festive fraud**

Now that we know what to look for, what can we do to protect ourselves and our families? Here are some simple practical tips you can follow:

**Be suspicious:** A little bit of suspicion goes a long way. Be on the lookout for anything unexpected, urgent requests that trigger your emotions and tempting offers. Double check the URL of the site you are visiting.

**Do your research:** If you're buying from a site or seller you haven't used before, do yourself a favor and take a few minutes to do some research before clicking the “buy” button. Find out if the company is reputable by using a review site like the Better Business Bureau. Take time to fully read the description of what you are buying. In 2020 some very disappointed [eBay customers received photos](#) of the latest PS5 console rather than the console itself. The rushed buyers didn't read the description, which included the very important detail that it was a photo of the console that was for sale, not the console itself.

**Choose your payment methods carefully:** Credit cards often provide greater protections when it comes to fraud. Also consider using a virtual card, which ties to your same card account, but uses a different number. If possible, designate a single card for online purchases and keep it at a lower credit limit. Another way to protect yourself is to use a trusted payment site like PayPal. That way you aren't sharing your card number and you have another party to contest your purchase if something goes wrong.

**Set up alerts on your banking/accounts:** If you become a victim of fraud, having banking alerts set up will help you spot it sooner, allowing you to limit the potential damage.

**Spread the word:** Talk to your friends and family about scams that are out there and the simple steps they can take to protect themselves.

Situations where people spend money more freely tend to attract fraud. That's certainly the case during November and December, when retailers generate, on average, [19% of their annual sales](#).

While the recent rise in ransomware has put many businesses on high alert, triggering new investments in data protection and backup software, hackers are sophisticated and relentless – consumers must be diligent with their shopping habits as well. The holidays are a time to celebrate, but they're also a time to be careful. A little due diligence can help limit the threats posed by festive fraud.

HEADLINE	12/27 Unstoppable rise of the internet scammer
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.vice.com/en/article/4awvqp/the-unstoppable-rise-of-the-internet-scammer">https://www.vice.com/en/article/4awvqp/the-unstoppable-rise-of-the-internet-scammer</a>
GIST	<p>From annoying fake delivery texts, to hackers forcing Instagram users to film <a href="#">hostage-style videos of themselves promoting get-rich-quick schemes</a>, 2021 was the year scamming blew up.</p> <p>As Paul Maskell, fraud and cybercrime prevention manager at UK Finance, puts it: “There’s a flavour of fraud for everyone.”</p> <p>In the first half of 2021, <a href="#">criminals in the UK stole over £750m through fraud</a> – a big portion of which came from online scams. This was an increase of over 30 per cent compared to the first half of 2020 and it doesn’t look to be slowing down. Younger people are also increasingly becoming victims. In the last 12 months, <a href="#">Action Fraud has had more reports</a> from people aged 20-29 and 30-39 than any other age groups.</p> <p>“Over the last 18 months, criminals have had to adapt online as much as we have in some ways,” says Maskell. As our lives have moved even further online, so too have scams – 80 per cent of cases reported to Action Fraud are now “cyber-enabled”, AKA done using digital devices or the internet. This may account for why we’re falling victim to scams in greater numbers than our nans, who are less likely to be shopping, socialising or investing money online.</p> <p>Maskell says it’s not just that our reliance on the internet has made us easier targets for scammers; it’s also that technology creates a barrier between scammers and their victims, making it easier for them to steal money and sleep at night. “You’ve got that aspect of the accessibility to commit fraud, but on the other side of the coin you have: ‘I’m increasingly detached from my victim.’”</p> <p>The way our lives have changed since the start of the pandemic has also made it easier for certain scams to thrive. Jenny Ross, Which? money editor, says that scams were already rising year-on-year in the UK before Covid, but since the pandemic, they have exploded.</p> <p>Think about our increasing reliance on buying stuff off the internet. This goes a long way to explaining why online shopping and auction scams were the most reported types of scam this year, with some <a href="#">Tiktok users even selling “scam bibles”</a>, detailing how to exploit Depop’s refund policy and sell on items to make extra cash.</p> <p>Scams like these shot up by 65 per cent in 2021 and account for one-in-four incidents reported to Action Fraud, with 56 per cent of them coming from 20-39 year olds. “That really speaks to the change in behaviour – so many people were doing their grocery shopping first of all, but ordering all sorts of other bits and pieces as well, making them more vulnerable,” says Ross.</p> <p>And remember those missed delivery text scams from earlier this year? You probably do – <a href="#">research by Which?</a> showed that three in five of us have received them. They weren’t just a phishing attempt to get you to put your bank details into a website, but also involved a more elaborate reverse-scam. In this, scammers call the victim, then pose as a bank employee and refer to the original phishing text. By convincing the victim they are at threat from a phishing attempt, the scammers get them to transfer money to a bank account they control. While you might have swerved the dodgy texts, some people lost <a href="#">thousands of pounds</a> to them.</p> <p>Gareth Norris, senior lecturer in psychology at Aberystwyth University says there are a number of factors involved in how and why we fall for these sorts of scams, but timing is key. “They’ve died off now, I’ve not had one for ages, but there will be a new one coming through,” he says. “People will go on to any website because they think there’s this Black Friday deal and enter their details.”</p> <p>Timing also played a role in the rise of cryptocurrency, NFT and other investment scams in 2021, with <a href="#">some people sinking hundreds of thousands of pounds into them</a>. This year, being openly interested in money has gone from the preserve of London Pride-swilling City boys, to pretty much everyone with access to a finance app and a few spare pounds swimming around.</p>



It's easy to see why: Bitcoin's price is three times higher now than it was 12 months ago and interest in trading stocks has also skyrocketed since a load of amateur traders [took on Wall Street](#) and inflated the price of "meme" stock, Gamestop, back in January.

Ross says that while this new excitement over investing could be a good thing for getting younger people interested in their finances, it has also made it easier and more likely for people to buy into things they might not fully understand – a perfect situation for scammers to exploit.

"It's bringing about something of a Wild West in investment," she says. "Via Tiktok or various social channels, anyone can pop up and present themselves as a finance guru or expert and people are taking their word for it."

All three of the experts interviewed in this article agreed that social media use has driven people's fear of missing out on investment opportunities. They say the growing trend of people handing out financial tips and showing off their supposed profits in communities [such as FinTok](#) has increased impulsivity, making people less likely to think properly before entering into both legit investments as well as scams.

Excitement over [crypto](#) and [NFTs](#) has led people to jump on even the most absurd and unlikely sounding "investments". While some meme currencies have grown in value over time, others seem to pop up out of nowhere and vanish even quicker than that, in what are known as rug pull scams. These are where a cryptocurrency or NFT's developers hypes up its product, attracting investors, before running off with the funds and crashing the product's value in the process. So far, rug pulls have taken in investors on [ape NFTs](#) as well as cryptocurrencies based on [Squid Game](#) and even [monkey jizz](#).

Norris questions to what degree some of these can even truly be considered scams – and says in some cases there's almost an element of people wanting to get taken in by them. The rise of these meme investment opportunities is built on the back of internet irony and nihilism. If you are chucking money into a product called monkey jizz, or investing in a cryptocurrency with no real purpose, can it really be that shocking when everything vanishes? "There's a difference between unwittingly falling for something and whether you have taken a risk," Norris says.

The pandemic has left us more detached – both from reality and each other – and the saddest result of that might be the rise in romance scams, [with online dating cons up 41 percent over the pandemic](#). A popular one this year has involved fake Tinder accounts matching with people, striking up romantic conversation, and luring them into [chucking money into nonexistent cryptocurrencies](#).

Maskell says that just like other scams, these take advantage of the narrative we feed ourselves when we interact online. We believe what we want to believe and we read things in the way we want to read them. Whether you're lonely and want to find someone to love you, or you are trying to make quick cash on a cryptocurrency that turns out not to really exist, scammers are able to capitalise on our anxiety more than ever.

"You project a lot of your emotions, your expectations, on to technology," he says. "That goes the same for everything – why does fake news have such an impact? Why do we feel we are in such a polarised society right now? Because you don't have opposing feedback to bring you back down to earth, especially around that story you are telling yourself."

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HEADLINE	12/28 TikTok content moderator sues over trauma
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/28/tiktok-moderator-lawsuit-violent-content-ptsd/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/28/tiktok-moderator-lawsuit-violent-content-ptsd/</a>
GIST	A content moderator who reviewed videos for TikTok is suing the social media company, alleging that it did not protect her from suffering psychological trauma after "constant" exposure to violent videos that showed sexual assault, beheadings, suicide and other graphic scenes.

For as long as 12 hours each day, Candie Frazier and other moderators reviewed “extreme and graphic violence,” including videos of “genocide in Myanmar, mass shootings, children being raped, and animals being mutilated” in an effort to filter out such content from being viewed by TikTok users, according to the lawsuit. The legal action was filed in federal court in California last week against TikTok and its parent company, ByteDance.

Frazier developed “significant psychological trauma including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder” as a result of her exposure to the videos, according to the lawsuit, which is seeking class-action status. The legal challenge, which alleges that TikTok violated California labor law by failing to provide a “safe work environment,” requests compensation for moderators who were exposed to the material. It also asks that TikTok and ByteDance provide mental health support and treatment to former and current moderators.

Frazier is not a TikTok employee — she works for Telus International, a firm that provides workers to other businesses — but the lawsuit alleges that “ByteDance and TikTok control the means and manner in which content moderation occurred.”

TikTok did not immediately respond to a request for comment late Monday. A spokesperson for Telus International, which is not a defendant in the suit, said in a statement that the company was “proud of the valuable work our teams perform to support a positive online environment,” adding that the company has a “robust resiliency and mental health program in place.”

The lawsuit comes as content management practices at one of the world’s most popular social media platforms are under scrutiny. TikTok [revealed](#) in September that it had more than 1 billion global users.

School districts nationwide were on alert this month after authorities raised concerns over what they said were threats of violence spread on the platform, following a shooting at a high school in Michigan that left four people dead.

TikTok [denied](#) that the threats had spread widely on its platform, though gun-control advocates called for the company to improve content regulation.

TikTok also said this month that it would adjust its algorithm after an [investigation](#) by the Wall Street Journal found the technology could feed users streams of content focused on subjects like depression and extreme dieting.

Moderators are made to view as many as 10 videos simultaneously, while being pushed by TikTok software “to review videos faster and faster,” according to Frazier’s lawsuit. During the course of a 12-hour shift, workers are allowed two 15-minute breaks and an hour for lunch, the suit says.

Telus said that its employees could raise concerns through “several internal channels” but that Frazier has never done so. “Her allegations are entirely inconsistent with our policies and practices,” the company said. An attorney for Frazier did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Similar allegations have been made by content moderators for other social media companies, including Facebook. Last year, Facebook (whose parent company is now called Meta) [agreed to a \\$52 million settlement](#) with thousands of moderators, after a lawsuit alleged that Facebook failed to protect them from traumatic content.

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## Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	12/27 Tampa terrorism case raises questions
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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.tampabay.com/news/hillsborough/2021/12/30/tampa-terrorism-case-raises-questions-of-surveillance-searches-mental-illness/">https://www.tampabay.com/news/hillsborough/2021/12/30/tampa-terrorism-case-raises-questions-of-surveillance-searches-mental-illness/</a>
GIST	<p>TAMPA — A year ago, federal prosecutors accused a Tampa man of <a href="#">plotting a mass shooting in support of the ISIS terrorist group</a>.</p> <p>FBI agents in a criminal complaint described Muhammed Momtaz Al-Azhari’s collection of a bulletproof vest, an Uzi submachine gun, a silencer and firearm parts, among other items. They said he perused Islamic State chat rooms, researched the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, and explored Honeymoon Island and other popular Tampa Bay locations <a href="#">as they said he planned a similar massacre</a>.</p> <p>Since Al-Azhari’s arrest in May 2020, his case has moved quietly through federal court, with defense attorneys raising questions about the tactics investigators used to monitor him and search his belongings. Late last month came a new wrinkle: His defense says he might be mentally unfit for trial.</p> <p>Court records detail a complex investigation amid flurries of pretrial litigation.</p> <p><b>Spy planes</b></p> <p>One legal battle at the heart of Al-Azhari’s case concerns what’s been described as a “secret spy plane surveillance program.”</p> <p>In a court document filed in August, Assistant Federal Defender Samuel Landes describes a fleet of small airplanes that the FBI owns and uses to conduct covert surveillance. Each plane bears a tail number that is registered with the Federal Aviation Administration to fictitious front companies, the lawyer wrote.</p> <p>The aircraft have high-tech video cameras affixed to their undersides, with powerful lenses capable of zooming in on people and places, and infrared technology that allows night vision and thermal imaging, the motion alleges. From high altitudes, the planes circle and record their targets.</p> <p>In the case of Al-Azhari, the defense says the government collected 900 aerial surveillance videos, taken from planes whose tail numbers have been linked to the FBI. The planes followed Al-Azhari whenever he left his home, including jaunts to Honeymoon Island State Park and Orlando, where the government alleges he was scouting targets for a mass shooting. The planes also watched him get his mail, visit his sister’s apartment, check in at a medical clinic and go to a facility where he sought mental health treatment, according to the defense.</p> <p>They flew at about 10,000 feet, sometimes over clouds, recording for more than 428 hours over more than 40 days, the defense alleges.</p> <p>“Small, quiet, and high in the sky, the planes were barely noticeable to those on the ground,” Landes wrote. “The FBI sometimes used multiple planes on the same day, with a new plane picking up the surveillance another had left off.”</p> <p>The defense asserts that the aerial surveillance was unreasonable, and violated Al-Azhari’s privacy. They say it constituted a search — one for which the government did not have a warrant. Thus, they want a judge to order that the videos be barred from the case.</p> <p>The FBI’s use of surveillance planes has been the subject of controversy since 2015, when national news media reports revealed their existence and their use to monitor protests.</p> <p>The FBI and federal prosecutors dispute that the agency operates a secret spy plane program. In response to media reports about the planes, the FBI has acknowledged that it uses “aerial assets” as part of investigations of specific individuals.</p> <p>In a written response, prosecutors say that the “Orwellian state” described by the defense is “untethered from reality.” They offered to have pilots testify about the planes and their purpose.</p>

A judge has yet to rule on the issue.

### **An arrest and a search**

On May 1, 2020, Tampa police approached Al-Azhari at a Home Depot store where he'd worked on North Florida Avenue. An arrest report states that they went there in response to an "intelligence bulletin" regarding threats he was said to have made against fellow employees. In his pocket, they found a revolver, court documents state.

That night, he phoned his sister, Muna Al-Azhari, from jail. A document filed by his defense attorneys includes a partial transcript of the call.

They talk about bail. (He would be released within days, but later re-arrested). He tells her to go back to the Home Depot and drive his car away so that it doesn't get towed. He also tells her to go to his house, gather all his stuff — including a laptop and a Saudi Arabian court document — and either keep everything or trash it.

"I have some toys ..." he says, according to the transcript. Court documents state that she understood "toys" to mean guns.

"I want you to go to my house tonight," he says. "I have some toys there that I want you to pick up, they are all legal and allowed, and keep them at your place temporarily."

He tells her he wants her to do it right away. He says he's afraid authorities or his landlord might see the items.

"I'm afraid if they tow the car, they will also find a toy of mine inside," he says. "I have a toy at home and a toy in the car. ..."

"Muna, they will take the toy to the police," he says.

The defense document states that the FBI had recruited Muna Al-Azhari as an informant against her brother. Prosecutors deny this, writing that agents had been in contact with members of his family since 2019 and that Muna Al-Azhari had been speaking with a particular FBI agent because she was concerned about her brother's activities and mental health.

After visiting her brother in jail, she discussed with an agent the best way to dispose of Al-Azhari's guns. They tried to obtain Al-Azhari's keys from jail, but were unsuccessful. Agents would later go with Muna Al-Azhari to her brother's house, which they found locked. She helped the agents get in through an unlocked window after signing a form giving her consent for them to search.

Once inside, the agents seized a gun and ammunition, knives, a crossbow, a stun gun, cellphones, a laptop computer and various other items.

Prosecutors say that the jail call demonstrates that Al-Azhari gave his sister authority to enter his home and look through his belongings. The defense calls it an unlawful search. They've asked a judge to bar from the case any evidence the government seized as a result.

### **A mental health concern**

The case has been dogged by new concerns over his psychological state. Late last month, defense attorneys requested a mental health exam. They noted a family history of mental illness and detailed their own observations of their client.

In his teens, Al-Azhari was imprisoned in Saudi Arabia, where he was tortured and began to experience visual hallucinations and talk to people who were not there, according to the motion requesting a mental health exam. The motion describes his problems worsening after his release. He would sleep by his front door at night and wake up panicked, believing that Saudi spies or the FBI were going to kill him.

	<p>He never received treatment for his problems until adulthood. A psychologist retained by the defense examined Al-Azhari in jail, diagnosing schizophrenia, autism spectrum disorder, and adjustment disorder with anxiety and depression.</p> <p>The motion notes that Al-Azhari believes the psychologist and a member of his defense team are spies. He has refused treatment or medication. Housed in a windowless jail cell away from other prisoners, his condition has worsened, defense attorneys said.</p> <p>Earlier this month, a judge ordered another mental health expert to examine Al-Azhari. If found incompetent, he would be committed to a government mental health facility for treatment until he is deemed well enough to continue toward trial.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Searching for home after escaping Taliban</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/afghan-taliban-escape-resettlement/?itid=hp-top-table-main">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/afghan-taliban-escape-resettlement/?itid=hp-top-table-main</a>
GIST	<p>Her departure from Kabul reminded her of some “zombie movie,” the young woman said. It was an experience she could describe only as “dehumanizing, terrifying and very traumatizing.”</p> <p>When she woke up in a lakeside resort in Uganda, she found it impossible to square her new surroundings with the chaos of leaving. Nearly four months later, she is still reeling, stuck in the East African country, uncertain when she will be able to leave.</p> <p>“It feels like we are prisoners,” she said. “I am just angry.”</p> <p>The woman spoke on the condition of anonymity out of concern for her safety. She is among some 124,000 civilians who were evacuated from Kabul in a U.S.-led airlift after the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August. Most fled on U.S. military aircraft. Others escaped on commercial flights, or private or allied planes. They were uprooted and scattered across the globe. Her account is similar to those of many other Afghans who remain stranded, unsure how to reach a new country where they can find permanent residence.</p> <p>As of Dec. 24, more than 75,000 Afghan nationals had arrived in the United States, according to the Department of Homeland Security, with about 25,000 of them still living at military installations. About 2,500 Afghans are at U.S. bases overseas, waiting to be processed.</p> <p>For thousands of other Afghan evacuees, the future is even less certain.</p> <p>No international organization appears to be keeping track of the people in this abrupt and vast diaspora — or coordinating their care. Officials with the U.S. military, the State Department and DHS did not provide The Washington Post with any assessment of how many of the Afghans evacuated by commercial, private or allied flights are outside the U.S. pipeline, or where they are located. The United Nations refugee agency, whose staff supports refugees in some 130 countries, says it cannot provide numbers on how many Afghans have left since the Taliban came to power because it was not involved in the evacuations.</p> <p>The Post contacted 194 governments around the world (hearing back from 41 of them), conducted dozens of interviews and collected government statements to find out where Afghans have fled. The analysis found that they have ended up in more than 40 countries.</p> <p>In addition to the Afghans who were airlifted, thousands are reportedly <a href="#">crossing into Iran</a> every day.</p> <p>The Post interviewed Afghans in Albania, Australia, Germany, Mexico and Uganda who left their homeland after the Taliban takeover. Host governments and nongovernmental organizations are helping</p>

them get by. They are in various phases of the migration process, with some in more stable situations than others, but they remain united in their heartbreak over leaving Afghanistan so suddenly, their guilt about those left behind, and their feeling of disorientation in new surroundings.

## **AUSTRALIA**

Noor Mohammad Ramazan built a career showing off the wonders of Afghanistan. As a tour guide, he had spent the past six years taking foreigners around the ancient citadel in Herat, the breathtaking architecture of Mazar-e Sharif's Blue Mosque and the deep turquoise waters of the Band-e Amir lakes in Afghanistan's first national park. His adventures were documented by [YouTubers exploring the country](#).

"I just wanted to show Afghanistan's beauties," he said. "It was a shame nobody was talking about that and they were only talking of its explosions."

Now the 33-year-old is far from those treasures, living in a small community outside Melbourne, Australia, with his wife, Masuma, and two children. Fearful that the Taliban would punish him and his family for catering to Western travelers, he obtained an Australian humanitarian visa with the help of a former client who knew an Australian senator. The family left Kabul on Aug. 23. After more than a week in a military camp in Dubai, [they landed in Melbourne](#), where Ramazan felt safer but disoriented. Story continues below advertisement

In Afghanistan, he said, "you live with your cousins and family members and classmates." But in Australia, he said, "you don't know your neighbors."

While the government gives them money, it is not enough, Ramazan said. He applied for work as a translator and also hopes to publish a collection of his own short stories — tales based on Ramazan's experiences growing up under Taliban rule.

His family is building a new life, and he is grateful for the freedoms and the feeling of peace. But he is worried for the brothers, sisters, parents, uncle and cousins he could not take with him.

"They are fine, but they are terrified," he said. "We are terrified as well."

## **Albania**

Miraqa Popal, 34, wakes up in Albania each day and sees the ocean.

"I am lucky," he said from an Adriatic seaside resort in Lezhe where he and hundreds of other Afghans have been staying after escaping Kabul. "At least I was able to leave. And to hopefully start a new life."

Albania is temporarily hosting 2,400 Afghans who fled Taliban rule as they wait for permanent homes. Popal applied for a Canadian visa but is still waiting to hear back. He does not know any Afghans who have left Albania.

He is thrilled with the care he and his family are receiving, but he misses his seven-room house in Kabul, with a big courtyard where they used to throw parties for relatives who now remain in Afghanistan. In Albania, they have two rooms: one for him, his wife and three kids to sleep in; the other a small kitchen, where they cook simple dinners of tomatoes, onions and eggplant.

Popal once traveled the world directing coverage for TOLONews, Afghanistan's largest news channel. After nearly four months, he resumed working for the organization as a transcript editor. It feels great to be back, he said, but he misses being in the field.

"It's hard to work online," he said.

## **Germany**



Nasir Sultani and his sister Masooma arrived in Krakow, Poland, in August and were mesmerized by the medieval architecture, the kindness of the people. They loved it there, but they felt they could not stay.

The job and education prospects in Poland were not promising, friends told Nasir, a human rights activist. So they crossed into Germany in hopes of finding American officials who could help process his sister's U.S. resettlement application; she applied after working for a U.S. company in Kabul for two years, but has not received a case number.

Now living in a Berlin refugee camp with migrants from Syria, Iraq and Russia, they feel lost in the shuffle. They do not know if they will be permanently resettled in Germany, let alone the United States.

"I want to find some way back to Poland," Nasir said in November, adding that he regretted their decision to move on to Berlin. But he still yearns for Kabul. "No matter where I go, it doesn't look like my homeland."

### **Uganda**

In Uganda, an Afghan woman feels trapped.

It is not uncomfortable in the apartment where she is staying, but there is nothing to do. The woman, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of concern for her safety, spends her days writing and watching "Downton Abbey" on Netflix, waiting for responses from the U.S. Embassy. They have not come.

"It's a beautiful country," she said of Uganda, "but it's wasted on us."

Uganda's foreign minister, Gen. Jeje Odongo, said in a phone interview this summer that his government had accepted 51 evacuees on a transit basis in late August after receiving a request for assistance from the U.S. government.

There have been small glimmers of happiness: The woman tends to stray kittens she found in the area. Their fluffy pink ears provide comfort.

She hopes to start a new life in the United States but has bittersweet feelings about leaving her beloved Kabul and worries about her family and friends still there.

"It had everything but safety," she said of Kabul. "It's like if an amazing human had cancer and you couldn't save them."

### **Mexico**

Nilofar Quraishi and her husband, Zabihullah, were so close to escaping. They had made it into the airport in August and were waiting on a flight to get out. But days passed and Nilofar, then five months pregnant, was starting to feel ill.

They decided to go back home, leaving the airport through the same gates where a terrorist attack would kill more than 180 people just hours later.

Unable to escape through the chaos of the airlift, they looked for another way out. One month later, Zabihullah, who taught civil engineering at Kardan University in Kabul, decided to try again after friends said they could help him if he made it to Mexico.

They crossed into Iran, saying Nilofar needed special medical care for her pregnancy. There, they received a tourist visa to Mexico.

To pay the airfare, they sold Nilofar's jewelry. But when the flight from Istanbul to Mexico City landed, they were turned away.

	<p>“I told them, as a human being you know my country is destroyed and we are under threat of the Taliban,” Zabihullah said. “They told us, ‘No, sorry.’ ”</p> <p>The couple was sent back to Istanbul, only to find out once they landed that the Mexican Foreign Ministry had changed its mind and would let them in.</p> <p>Now in Mexico, their journey has only begun. Nilofar, who worked for an Afghan media outlet, gave birth to their first child, Oswah, a girl with dark hair and big brown eyes, on Dec. 15. But parenthood feels bittersweet.</p> <p>“We feel so happy for our baby,” Zabihullah said. “But I wish I could have our parents see and care for her.”</p> <p>Their hope is to raise Oswah in Canada, where Nilofar’s aunt lives, and they have appealed to the government for a visa.</p> <p>In another month, Zabihullah said, funds from a nongovernmental organization supporting their stay in Mexico will run out. They cannot support themselves.</p> <p>“Every day and night, my Nilofar is crying because of the current situation,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/28 UK: 12,000 Afghan refugees stuck in hotels</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/28/12000-afghan-refugees-to-start-new-year-stuck-in-uk-hotels">https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/28/12000-afghan-refugees-to-start-new-year-stuck-in-uk-hotels</a>
GIST	<p>About 12,000 Afghan refugees will begin 2022 in UK hotels as the government struggles to persuade enough councils to find permanent homes for the new arrivals, the Guardian has learned.</p> <p>Of the 16,500 people airlifted from <a href="#">Afghanistan</a> to the UK since August, “over 4,000 individuals have either moved into a settled home or are in the process of being moved or matched to a suitable home”, according to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).</p> <p>The rest wait eagerly for news of where they will begin to rebuild their lives, though many say their hearts remain in Afghanistan, where they hope to return one day.</p> <p>They will not be evenly distributed across the UK after the government decided not to force local authorities to rehouse the refugees. More than 300 local authorities in the UK have stepped up to offer permanent accommodation, according to a Home Office spokesperson.</p> <p>According to the most recent figures, by <a href="#">the end of September</a>, councils in Yorkshire and the Humber had welcomed 213 of the 770 Afghans resettled across the UK this year. Ninety-two of those were in Bradford, compared with just 24 across all the London councils. After Bradford, Edinburgh was the city to have resettled the most Afghans this year: 67.</p> <p>As of 7 December, about 7,500 people had been relocated to the UK under the <a href="#">Afghan relocations and assistance policy</a> (Arap), which offered sanctuary to any current or former UK government employees who faced intimidation or a threat to their life.</p> <p><a href="#">Operation Pitting</a>, the Afghan airlift in August, brought 15,000 people to the UK. Since the evacuation, a further 1,500 people have followed.</p> <p>More than 12,000 Afghan evacuees remained in bridging accommodation as of 22 December, according to sources at both the DWP and Home Office. At least 4,000 of those are in London, according to London Councils, the local government association for Greater London.</p>

London council officials described the situation in hotels as “chaos” and expressed particular concern about the unsuitability of hotels in the long term to accommodate the large number of children currently living in them.

Many now have community ties with London, children have started school and as time goes by it will be harder to uproot them and move them to a different part of the country where there is a greater supply of affordable accommodation. While the government made housing grants available for the new arrivals, none of the Afghans who arrived in the UK after 31 August are eligible for these grants.

The vast majority of Afghan refugees stuck in hotels are not able to work yet because they do not have permanent addresses and cannot guarantee to an employer that they will not be shipped across the country with minimal notice.

Benafsha Yaqoobi, a visually impaired commissioner at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, who has been living in a four-star central London hotel since August, said the local council had advised some Afghans that they could not work while they were stuck in the hotels.

Some guests were “very excited” to have found jobs, only to be told they could not take them, she said, because it was not known where they would be relocated, they could end up in Scotland.

Living in a hotel for so long was hard, said Yaqoobi, who is sharing a room with her husband, Mehdi Salami, who is also visually impaired. “For me, for all Afghan people who are here, it’s very difficult, especially with Covid increasing these days. In a hotel and living like this, it’s not easy.”

When the Guardian [spoke to Yaqoobi in September](#), she pleaded for world leaders to help more disabled people flee Afghanistan. She continues to be very worried about the disabled children she used to help with her charity, the Rahyab Organisation, who she had to leave behind, and hopes to begin studying for a PhD.

Three months on, she has struck up a friendship with Mozghan Shaban, a DWP employee originally from Afghanistan, who spent several weeks going from hotel to hotel in London helping the new arrivals apply for universal credit.

The DWP had processed more than 3,000 claims for universal credit, as of 3 December, covering more than 4,700 people. The government legislated to exempt those arriving under the Afghan relocation and resettlement schemes from the usual residency tests which restrict access to certain benefits upon arrival in the UK.

Shaban, whose family fled Afghanistan in the late 1990s, can speak Farsi, one of the main Afghan languages, and was well placed to help the new arrivals navigate British bureaucracy.

She is well known around the hotels for her jokes, reassuring the guests that they do not need to fear their new country – “the worst you’ll get is rain”. She describes herself as a “therapist, mum, sister” who helps them understand British customs and culture and particularly gender roles.

“Some of the families who have come here are very, very traditional,” she said. “It’s quite customary for a girl or woman to stand up and offer her seat to, say, her brother or her father. That’s just a thing that we do out of respect, because in Afghanistan men are treated as gods and women, not so much.”

She preempts cultural misunderstandings too: “I had to explain to people that if they go out on the street, don’t stare too much at a woman. And to explain that the LGBTQ community is quite large here.”

She has been amazed by the Afghans’ positivity: “The energy that they have for life is just so inspiring. They’ve been knocked out several times over decades and decades of war and they still get up and they’re

	still willing to rebuild the life in a completely different country, not knowing the language, not knowing the environment, not knowing anything."
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Taliban claim: security to Afghanistan</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.foxnews.com/world/taliban-security-afghanistan-after-us-withdrawal-economic-collapse">https://www.foxnews.com/world/taliban-security-afghanistan-after-us-withdrawal-economic-collapse</a>
GIST	<p>A <a href="#">Taliban</a> spokesperson recently praised the Islamist group for bringing security to <a href="#">Afghanistan</a>, saying it did what the United States and other countries could not do in 20 years.</p> <p>Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's told Al-Jazeera Network on Dec. 23 that the Taliban is sticking to the <a href="#">Doha Agreement</a> and claimed that Afghanistan has not been used to plot attacks on the U.S.</p> <p>Muttaqi blamed the previous Afghani government for allowing <a href="#">ISIS</a> to establish a foothold, but said the Taliban was able to address the security threat in a "short time."</p> <p>He said in the four months since the U.S.' chaotic <a href="#">withdrawal</a>, the Taliban has "managed to bring about the kind of security that the U.S. and the armies of 50 countries had failed to bring about in 20 years."</p> <p>"Had they managed to achieve this, they would have considered this a great victory," Muttaqi said. "We have succeeded in this all on our own, and for this we are worthy of praise, not of sanctions."</p> <p>Muttaqi claimed further that the Taliban respects human rights and "works for the people."</p> <p>"We inherited a weak economy and widespread corruption from the previous government," he said. "We want to build a strong economy and have a good relationship with the world."</p> <p>Despite Muttaqi's proclamations of a secure nation, Afghanistan's economy is on the verge of total collapse. Nearly 80% of Afghanistan's previous government's budget came from the international community. That money, now cut off, financed hospitals, schools, factories and government ministries.</p> <p>Sanctions have crippled banks while the U.N., the United States and others struggle to figure out how to get hundreds of millions of dollars of humanitarian aid to Afghans while bypassing the Taliban.</p> <p>The World Health Organization has warned that millions of children in Afghanistan are suffering malnutrition, while the United Nations says some 97% of Afghans are living below the poverty line.</p> <p>And despite assurances from the Taliban that they would respect women's rights, female high school students between the grades of seven and 12 have not been permitted to go to school since the Taliban took over, and many female civil servants have been told to stay home.</p> <p>Taliban officials have said they need time to create gender-segregated arrangements in schools and workplaces that meet their severed interpretation of Islam.</p>
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## Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	<b>12/17 Another time capsule under Lee statue?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/us/robert-e-lee-statue-capsule-confederate.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/27/us/robert-e-lee-statue-capsule-confederate.html</a>
GIST	Crews removing the pedestal of a Robert E. Lee statue in Richmond, Va., on Monday found what appeared to be an elusive time capsule that may contain rare Confederate memorabilia, including a photo of Abraham Lincoln in his coffin.

The discovery stoked excitement among historians and officials, including Gov. Ralph Northam, who declared on [Twitter](#): “They found it! This is likely the time capsule everyone was looking for.”

Many people had been searching for the artifact. Last week, [a separate time capsule was found](#) near the base of the same statue and opened. The items inside that one, however, [puzzled conservators](#), who theorized that that one might have been left behind by the workers who built the statue. Inside was an 1875 almanac, a waterlogged book of fiction, a British coin, a catalog, one letter and a photograph of James Netherwood, a master stonemason who worked on the Robert E. Lee pedestal.

But officials were optimistic that the time capsule found on Monday is the one they had sought. The journalist and author Dale M. Brumfield, [writing in Richmond magazine in December 2017](#), described finding references to the Richmond time capsule in historical records, including suggestions that it could contain dozens of Confederate artifacts, like weapons used during the Civil War and a square piece of wood cut from a tree that grew near the grave of Stonewall Jackson, the Confederate general.

Devon Henry, the owner of Team Henry Enterprises, oversees the company assigned to remove the statue — [a symbol of white power](#) that the governor ordered removed in September after a long legal battle. Mr. Henry said on Monday that after months of tedious excavation, sledgehammering and confusion over where the time capsule was, he finally felt “vindicated” in his crew’s efforts.

“A lot of folks were like, ‘Yo, you guys thought you had the time capsule and it’s not it — you’ve been bamboozled,’” Mr. Henry said.

He and his crew had searched for the time capsule in September, digging 15 feet below the northeast corner of the statue, where it was reportedly placed in 1887. They found nothing.

Then last week, they found the time capsule with random items such as an almanac and a British coin. But where, people asked him, was the one potentially holding a rare photo of Lincoln?

In response, they pulled out the big tools on Monday: a sledgehammer and a large excavator.

Mr. Henry told two spotters to notify the crew when they saw something noteworthy in the hole.

As they dug deeper, the granite appeared to look “more defined in shape,” he said.

“Take a little bit more off,” Mr. Henry said he told his crew.

As soon as they did, he blurted, “Stop!”

There it was, 20 feet under the pedestal: a granite capstone protecting a box made of copper.

If they had dug about five feet deeper in September, they probably would have found it, Mr. Henry said. “I knew it was there,” Mr. Henry said. “I knew we were going to find it.”

Mr. Henry said he called the governor’s office, and then the [Virginia Department of Historic Resources](#). Mr. Northam showed up at the site about 20 minutes after the discovery, beating some of the conservators to the scene, he said.

“He wants to see this through,” Mr. Henry said.

Conservators plan to open the box on Tuesday at 1 p.m., and the mystery of its contents may at last be settled.

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HEADLINE	12/27 Puget Sound region record weather year
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3293158/seattle-year-record-snow-heat-rain-fires-floods-cold-2021/">https://mynorthwest.com/3293158/seattle-year-record-snow-heat-rain-fires-floods-cold-2021/</a>

This month has been the culmination of a series of record weather systems across the Puget Sound region throughout the year, ranging from blazing summer heat to frigid winter temperatures.

Extreme weather events pretty much became the norm for all of Western Washington starting in February, and from there, it never really let up.

#### February snow

On Feb. 13, 8.9 inches of snow [fell in the Seattle area](#). That was the snowiest day the city had seen in any month in 52 years, and the most it had seen on a February day in nearly a century. Combined between Feb. 12 and Feb. 13, that was also the most snow the Seattle area had seen over a two-day period in 49 years.

While it didn't exceed the total snowfall of 2019's weeks-long event, that was more than [any single day of accumulation](#) Seattle had two years ago. In the larger context of February snow, the Seattle area stood at over 12 total inches for the month in 2021, the fifth most in February on record (2019 ranked as the second snowiest for that month).

#### April heat and June storms

Western Washington is no stranger to spring showers, but what it got instead this year was a surprise to many. Prior to 2021, Seattle had never seen seven straight days of 70-degree weather in the month of April. That came to an end this year, when the city averaged nearly 76 degrees between April 15 and April 21, cresting the 70-degree mark on each of those days.

Then, [in early June](#), widespread thunderstorms drenched the Puget Sound region, with 0.68 inches falling on a single day at Sea-Tac (where the NWS measures rainfall in the Seattle area). That topped a 75-year-old record for June 13.

#### Historic heat wave

June may have started with rainy weather, but scorching temperatures won out as the headline of the month when it was all said and done.

That saw [an historic heat wave](#) shatter records across Western Washington, with most major areas experiencing their hottest ever days during that period. That list included:

- Seattle (Sea-Tac) 108 degrees, previously 104 on June 27, 2021
- Bellingham 99 degrees, previously 96 on July 29, 2009
- NWS Seattle 107 degrees, previously 105 on July 29, 2009
- Olympia 110 degrees, previously 105 on June 27, 2021
- Quillayute 110, previously 99 on Aug. 9, 1981

Elsewhere, Washington reached its highest ever recorded temperature in the state's history during that period as well, topping out at 118 degrees at two National Weather Service Stations near Forks and Silver Creek.

#### July wildfires and a near-record dry streak

July was an alarming month for all of Washington, with an unprecedented drought and windy weather fueling some of the worst wildfires the state has ever seen.

By the end of July, Washington had [already hit an all-time record](#) for the number of fires for a single season, nearly doubling the 10-year average for that period of time. That also led to communities in Okanogan County experiencing the worst air quality they've ever seen in 15 years of available data. [In Winthrop](#), residents sandwiched between a pair of large fires to its eastern and western edges were experiencing the worst measured air quality [on the entire planet](#).

That trend persisted into August, when the Seattle area went 51 straight days without any measurable rainfall, falling just short of the 55-day record set in 2017. A second heat wave arrived in that same month, with temperatures at the time ranging into the low 90s alongside poor air quality brought on by wildfire smoke.



Rain and cold temperatures arrive

The Puget Sound region then shifted into [extreme wet weather conditions](#), with 0.81 inches of rain falling on Sept. 18. That broke an 11-year-old record for the day. Over that weekend, Seattle experienced 86% of its total average September rainfall in just three days.

The [following month](#), Seattle experienced the coldest average temperature the city had ever seen in the first two weeks of October at 43 degrees for a single day. The previous record was 43.5 degrees (high of 54 degrees and low of 33 degrees) set on Oct. 14, 1899. Not long after that, temperatures plummeted to 36 degrees, which was also the first new record low in October in nearly two decades.

November flooding

In mid-November, torrential rain submerged several areas across Skagit and Whatcom counties. In the town of Sumas, Washington, it's estimated that 75% of homes suffered water damage from flooding, with many parts of the region finding themselves almost completely underwater.

By the end of the month, Sea-Tac Airport — where the NWS measures rain for the Seattle area — had officially recorded over 19 inches of rain between September and November, over half of which fell in the latter month. That number represented an all-time record for rainfall in the region over that three-month period (known more formally as meteorological fall).

Seattle also experienced record high temperatures amid that rain, hitting 59 degrees on Nov. 28, tying the record for that date set in 1999. The following day, a new record for the minimum temperature in Seattle on Nov. 29 was also set at 52 degrees, besting the previous 50-degree record for that date from 1995. In Forks, rainfall over that 90-day time frame exceeded what Las Vegas has gotten over the last 13 years combined.

Snow, frigid temperatures in December

Not to be outdone, December came with its own set of weather-related records as well, with the Seattle Seahawks playing just their [third ever home game](#) in the snow the day after Christmas.

In the wake of that snow, temperatures in the Seattle area dipped to 17 degrees. Not only did that represent the coldest temperature the city has seen in over a decade, but it was also the [biggest difference](#) between the warmest (108 degrees in June) and coldest (17 degrees in December) temperatures in a single calendar year.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Israel bird flu outbreak; 5,200 cranes dead
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/28/bird-flu-outbreak-in-israel-kills-5000-cranes-and-sparks-slaughter-of-half-a-million-chickens">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/28/bird-flu-outbreak-in-israel-kills-5000-cranes-and-sparks-slaughter-of-half-a-million-chickens</a>
GIST	<p>A bird flu outbreak in northern <a href="#">Israel</a> has killed at least 5,200 migratory cranes and forced farmers to slaughter hundreds of thousands of chickens as authorities try to contain what they say is the deadliest wildlife disaster in the nation's history.</p> <p>Uri Naveh, a senior scientist at the Israel Parks and Nature Authority, said the situation was not yet under control. "Many of the birds are dead in the middle of the water body so it's difficult for them to be taken out," he said on Monday.</p> <p>Environmental protection minister Tamar Zandberg called the crisis "the most serious damage to wildlife in the history of the country". "The extent of the damage is still unclear," she tweeted.</p> <p>Yaron Michaeli, a spokesperson for the Hula Lake park, where the crane population is mainly based, said workers were removing the carcasses as quickly as possible, fearing they could infect other wildlife.</p>

	<p>Dafna Yurista, spokesperson for the Agriculture Ministry, said half a million chickens in the area were being slaughtered to prevent the disease from spreading.</p> <p>About 500,000 cranes pass through Israel each year on the way to Africa and a small number stay behind, Michaeli said. This year, an estimated 30,000 cranes stayed in Israel for the winter.</p> <p>Michaeli said it was believed the cranes were infected by smaller birds that had contact with farms affected by outbreaks.</p> <p>Israeli media carried photos of workers in white hazmat suits collecting crane carcasses after the birds were first found to be sick about 10 days ago.</p> <p>Michaeli said the deaths among cranes appeared to have stabilised in recent days. “This is a good sign,” he said. “They might be starting to get over this. We hope very much.”</p> <p>Prime minister Naftali Bennett’s office said officials from the agriculture, environment and health ministries were monitoring the situation. There was no immediate information about infections among people, it said.</p> <p>Naveh said the cleanup was going more slowly than expected. “We are trying to see if there’s any other solutions,” he said.</p>
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## Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 Algona hostage standoff: police kill suspect</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/police-fatally-shoot-person-suspected-of-holding-three-people-hostage-in-algona/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/police-fatally-shoot-person-suspected-of-holding-three-people-hostage-in-algona/</a>
GIST	<p>Two SWAT officers fatally shot an armed suspect who had held three people hostage for several hours Monday in Algona, according to police.</p> <p>Algona police responded around 1 p.m. to the 200 block of Algona Boulevard South following reports of a domestic violence situation involving three people being held hostage, police said in a news release. The suspect was reportedly armed and in apparent violation of a no-contact court order, police said.</p> <p>Officers tried to contact a female hostage and were then fired upon by the suspect as they attempted to rescue the woman and the two others being held hostage, according to police. The officers retreated and called for back-up.</p> <p>Officers from Auburn, Des Moines, Federal Way, Kent, Pacific and Tukwila helped set up a perimeter, police said. A behavioral unit and hostage negotiation team were brought in to negotiate with the suspect, police said.</p> <p>After several hours, police said they believed the hostages remained in potential danger. The Valley SWAT team was able to rescue the three hostages, according to police.</p> <p>Shortly after, officers encountered the suspect and two SWAT officers, from the Kent and Des Moines police departments, shot and killed the suspect, police said. No other people were injured.</p> <p>No other information, including the gender of the suspect and the relationship with the hostages, was immediately available. It was also not immediately clear where the shooting took place.</p> <p>The shooting will be investigated by the Independent Force Investigation Team.</p>

HEADLINE	<b>12/28 Denver: gunman shoots, kills 4; wounds 3</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/us/denver-shooting-lakewood.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/us/denver-shooting-lakewood.html</a>
GIST	<p>Four people were fatally shot and a police officer and two other people injured on Monday night in the Denver area by what appeared to be a lone gunman, who later died during a shootout, the police said.</p> <p>The violence took place across several locations in and near Colorado's capital, and the authorities said the gunman's motive was not immediately clear. Paul M. Pazen, the Denver police chief, <a href="#">told reporters during a news conference</a>: "This is the holiday season. To have this type of spree take place is not normal for our community."</p> <p>The shootings started after 5 p.m. in central Denver, where two women were killed and a man was injured, Chief Pazen said.</p> <p>Another man was fatally shot several blocks away, the chief said, and police officers exchanged gunfire with a suspect during a pursuit.</p> <p>The same suspect fled southwest to the nearby city of Lakewood, Chief Pazen said.</p> <p>Just before 6 p.m., the Lakewood Police Department received a report of shots fired at a business, John Romero, a spokesman for that department, told reporters during a joint news conference with Chief Pazen. A gunshot victim was later found and pronounced dead at the scene, Mr. Romero said, adding that police officers identified the car and the shooting suspect. But they did not publicly reveal his name.</p> <p>When the officers found the car, the gunman opened fire, and officers shot back, Mr. Romero said. The gunman then fled on foot to a Hyatt Hotel, where he is believed to have shot a clerk. He also shot and wounded a police officer after he left the hotel.</p> <p>The wounded officer was undergoing surgery, Mr. Romero said at the news conference. Paul Oskel, a spokesman for the Lakewood Police Department, said that he had no further information on the officer's condition. The hotel clerk's condition was not immediately clear as of Monday night.</p> <p>Mr. Romero said the suspect was later shot in Lakewood and pronounced dead at the scene. It was not immediately clear if police officers had shot him.</p> <p>Chief Pazen said that, based on preliminary information, the Denver Police Department believed that the same person was responsible for the shootings and the earlier shootout with the police.</p> <p>A number of mass shootings have taken place in Colorado since two students at Columbine High School shocked the nation in 1999 by killing a teacher and 12 classmates. In March, a gunman killed 10 people at a Boulder grocery store, including a police officer.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/27 France: Syria chemical weapons probe</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.usnews.com/news/business/articles/2021-12-27/france-detains-suspect-in-syria-chemical-weapons-probe">https://www.usnews.com/news/business/articles/2021-12-27/france-detains-suspect-in-syria-chemical-weapons-probe</a>
GIST	<p>LE PECQ, France (AP) — French investigators said Monday they have detained a man suspected of supplying authorities in Syria with materials that can be used in the production of chemical weapons.</p> <p>The dual French-Syrian national was arrested in the south of France while vacationing with his family and is being held on preliminary charges of complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity, a French judicial official said. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the probe covered by legal confidentiality rules.</p>

<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	<p>International investigators have blamed Syrian government forces for using toxic gas and nerve agents in the country's decade-long civil war. In April, member states of the global chemical weapons watchdog suspended Syria's voting rights at the organization as a punishment for the repeated use of toxic gas by Damascus.</p> <p>The man detained in France is suspected of having used a transport company in France and the United Arab Emirates to supply materials to Syria in violation of an international embargo. The man was handed preliminary charges on Saturday and is being held in custody, the judicial official said.</p> <p>The name of the man and his company weren't given. The judicial official didn't provide details about the materials he is suspected of transporting.</p>
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